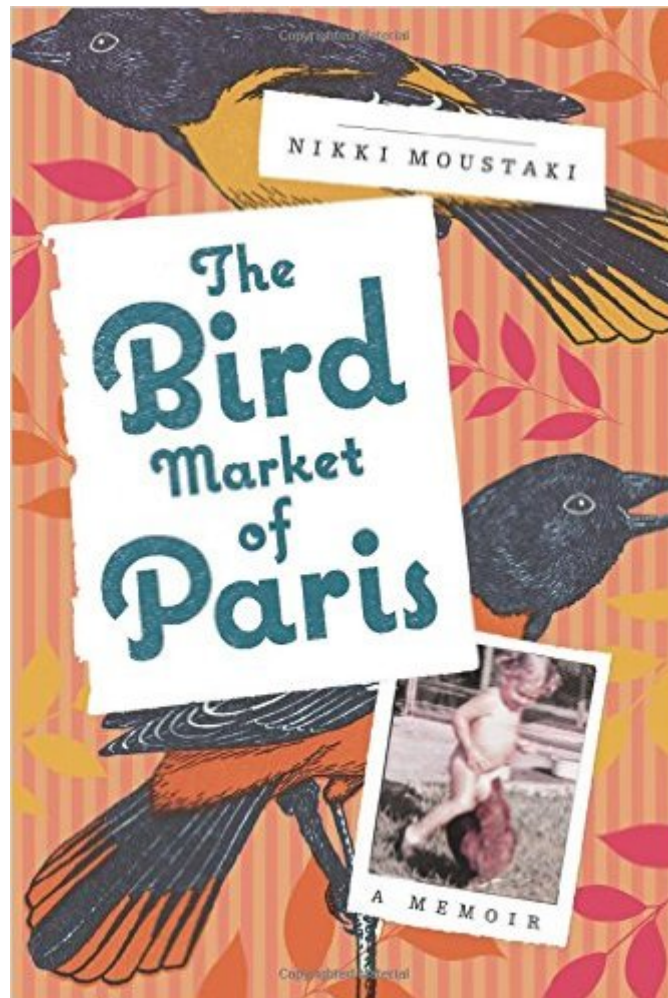


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The Bird Market Of Paris: A Memoir



Synopsis

"This may be the most original cross-species love story I've ever read. Part travelogue, part recovery memoir, and one hundred percent compelling." -Gwen Cooper, author of the New York Times bestselling *Homer's Odyssey: A Fearless Feline Tale, or How I Learned About Love and Life with a Blind Wonder Cat* "[An] epiphany-provoking gem of a story, skillfully crafted, vivid and rich with feeling." -Richard Blanco, Presidential Inaugural Poet and author of *The Prince of los Cocuyos: A Miami Childhood* "A stunning, exceptional memoir from a woman who truly understands and appreciates birds . . . A captivating, heart-warming tale and a delightful, inspiring read." -Joanna Burger, author of *The Parrot Who Owns Me: The Story of a Relationship* Nikki Moustaki grew up in 1980s Miami, the only child of parents who worked, played, and traveled for luxury sports car dealerships. At home, her doting grandmother cooked for and fed her, but it was her grandfather-an evening-gown designer, riveting storyteller, and bird expert-who was her mentor and dearest companion. Like her grandfather, Nikki fell hard for birds. "Birds filled my childhood," she writes, "as blue filled the sky." Her grandfather showed her how to hypnotize chickens, sneak up on pigeons, and handle baby birds. He gave her a white dove to release for luck on each birthday. And he urged her to, someday, visit the bird market of Paris. But by the time Nikki graduated from college and moved to New York City, she was succumbing to an alcohol addiction and was increasingly unable to care for her flock. When her grandfather died, guilt-ridden Nikki drank even more. In a last-ditch effort to honor her grandfather, she flew to France hoping to visit the bird market of Paris to release a white dove. And there, something astonishing happened that saved Nikki's life.

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Customer Reviews

First off, I cannot understand the reviewers who complained that the book did not have enough about birds. It has a lot about birds: technical, romantic and descriptive. If you want a memoir with more birds in it, you'll have to wait until a bird writes a memoir. In the "Author's Note" epilogue to this book, where presumably we are getting the unmodified author's voice, we learn the fates of Bonk, Sweetie, Little Miss Mango and Jesse (all birds, and Sweetie and Little Miss Mango have only bit parts) before being told that the most sympathetic and beloved human character (not counting Poppy who dies in the text) died suddenly at 49 leaving a husband and two children. The story is written in an unusual dual voice. The first-person narrator is smoothly matter-of-fact, but is telling us the inner thoughts of a fragile child. It is done so well and naturally that the reader only notices when external reality diverges from the subjective account. For example, the author loses it during a routine airplane flight. "I sobbed into my hands, snot running into my palms. . . . I fixed my eyes on the seat back in front of me and continued to sob, the kind of crying where hiccups and hyperventilation complicated the deep breathing and sighing that real crying requires. I grabbed the vomit bag from the webbed hammock where they keep the evacuation directions and hyperventilated into it. The bag made a sound like someone dancing on a piece of corrugated fiberglass." So we have this vivid, poetic, clinical description of irrational behavior normally found in toddlers. But then, "The guy next to me asked me what was wrong." Huh? He might draw back in distaste, or ask, "Do you need help?" with concern, or call the cabin attendant, but is it likely he'd ask an hysterically helpless stranger what was wrong? "I removed the bag from my mouth long enough to tell him I was afraid of flying." This sounds like someone in a bit more control than the original description. "'I shouldn't tell you this,' he said, and paused, 'but my Mom died in a plane crash.'" Well, either she happened to sit next to the least empathetic person on earth, with the blackest sense of humor, or maybe she exaggerated her breakdown; or embellished the story. But we're probably not getting journalistic fact. And note the elegantly masterful story-telling, setting up the well-timed joke. This occurs throughout the book. The author wants to go to her grandfather's funeral, but is told she will lose her job as an NYU dorm resident if she does. She calls 19 other residents to ask for someone to switch hours, not one calls her back, in fact several complain to the University that she's bothering them. Obviously there's something missing from this account. Was she the kind of student who had a grandparent die every couple of weeks (I've had a few of those in my time)? Was she a resident everyone wanted to get rid of for reasons the author didn't care to put in her memoir? Was she always calling people for help and not honoring her end of swaps? Did she exaggerate the difficulties (that would square with her never visiting her Grandfather's grave

afterwards, and ducking out of two other visits to fatally ill grandparents for even smaller reasons)? Her alcoholism is a bigger example. I've known a few alcoholics in my day, including a few high-functioning ones like the author who managed to acquire prestigious degrees and hold down difficult jobs while being drunk most of the time. But the actual events she describes to illustrate her condition wouldn't add up to a normal week for any of the alcoholics I knew. She goes to the building next door by mistake, she bursts into tears and cannot dress for a party, she gets into a slap and tussle bar fight that leaves her with bruises and a black eye, she misses work a few too many Mondays and Fridays, but it takes analysis of a calendar to notice it. The worst thing she does, by far, is report an imagined rape, but she quickly realizes her error and retracts. That wasted some people's time, and maybe made things a little worse for genuine rape victims who had drinks, but if it's the worst thing you've ever done, you haven't lived enough to write a memoir. Almost all of the symptoms she does cite are things done for other people. She seems to call everyone she knows when she's drunk, to tell them how drunk and unhappy she is. She has recurrent thoughts about suicide, but never comes close to hurting herself. She slashes and breaks things, and tells other people about it, but never does much real damage to anything. Obviously I have no idea the degree or type of problem the author had with alcohol, but as described in the book, there is a lot more violent tantrum and attention-seeking than what you find in serious accounts of alcoholics hitting bottom. Moreover she is cagey about exactly how much she drank, and she describes a lot more sugar than alcohol intake. Virtually all her drinking episodes involve total blackouts, more than seems likely, which allows her to draw a curtain over large parts of her story, while pretending to be a fully honest narrator. The disconnect extends to places. She calls the New York neighborhood she lived in "Hell's Kitchen," and describes it as full of gangs, drugs, prostitutes and street danger. The name is accurate, but ironic today, and the picture was out of date 20 years before she moved in. By the time she got there, it was full of young professionals who enjoyed its immediate proximity to midtown offices, good public transportation and eclectic, slightly scruffy nightlife. Her trip to Paris mentions francs in situations that would likely have involved euros at the time she visited, and some of the descriptions seem ten or twenty years out of date. I think the idea here is that the author read about these places, and filtered her experiences through historical accounts. The technique is particularly powerful when the narration extends to magical accounts. Because the whole story has been tethered only loosely to the facts, a little magic fits in naturally. The impression is something like the *Secret Lives of Walter Mitty* in reverse. Mitty, of course, had a dull and unsatisfying life narrated with outrageously dramatic flights of fancy. This author tells us about her exciting and successful career, narrated with childish hurt feelings and embarrassment. An even better

comparison is the movie *The Marrying Kind* in which a divorcing couple narrates an account of their lives together, with the action on the screen belying the descriptions. The judge's classic line, "there are three sides to every story: yours, his and the truth," fits this book. I enjoyed this book for its skillful prose and subtly layered story. However not very much actually happens and if not for the author's childish over-reactions to events, this would be a short story rather than a novel. It is an interesting and brave idea for an author to expose her least mature thoughts and emotions, and an impressive achievement to do it so seamlessly. But at the end of the day, it's a lot of pages about the kid that lives inside the author, and her imaginary friends.

This is Nikki Moustaki's memoir from the time she was a young girl growing up near Miami through her twenties when she completed post-graduate work and then moved to Paris, France for two months after winning an NEA Grant. I devoured this thoroughly engrossing account of Nikki's family life, her devotion to her grandfather, her proclivity toward birds and her struggle with alcohol. This smartly written prose, without a hint of self pity, was moving and at times, funny. I loved her account of her remarkable grandfather, "Poppy," the son of European tailors who became a dress designer to the rich and famous. Poppy, who was full of wit and wisdom would dole out exactly the right snippet at exactly the right time: "Where there is life, there is hope." "Be a good girl." "Beware the hunters." "Always hope." Poppy and Nikki had a very special birthday tradition. That tradition is significant in the title of this memoir and that tradition also delivers a release as the conclusion crescendos at the bird market in Paris. Nikki Moustaki became a bird expert, writer and editor of many books on birds and animals. In *"The Bird Market of Paris,"* she shares interesting facts about birds and breeding. Aside from her expertise on birds, and what I believe must have been PTSD after Hurricane Andrew, I share with her a love of animals, an appreciation of the poetry of T.S. Eliot, the allure of distilled spirits (at a young age) and an attraction to "The City of Light." The next time I'm in Paris, I'll be sure it's on a Sunday so that I can visit the bird market of Paris.

On the care of raising young women *"The Bird Market of Paris"* by Nikki Moustaki, to be published in February 2015 is the true, compelling story of a young woman's painful trip from protected innocence to addiction and the trip back to reclaiming her life. This is Moustaki's memoir. She was blessed to be raised by her almost-magical Poppy and her more grounded grandmother, Nona. Poppy taught her to have a special solidarity and bond with him and birds that he never had with Nona. As she comes to realize "how fragile everything was, including myself", she turns increasingly to alcohol. At last, after much frustration, she is able to free herself in the famous bird market of

Paris. As a person enthralled with cross-species communication and affection this book delivers a thoroughly engaging grip that continues throughout. It is well written and thought provoking. Moustaki does not see birds as cute little comic-book characters, but affords them respect. The only complaint I have of the book, is that it ends too soon. To quote my yellow-crested parrot, "It's not fair." I rate this book a five. If you are not moved by it, please take a walk in the woods to recharge your inner voice. jodie marino nachison

Moustaki's story of her life with birds, her love for her Grandfather, and her battle with alcohol is riveting from the first page and never lets up for the next 250 or so pages. And there's even a hurricane. Frankly, the book could have been longer. For someone with three degrees in creative writing, she actually writes very well! While it is hard to believe she could remember some of the details depicted here, especially from the years lived in an alcoholic haze, the descriptions always ring true. This book does a great job of conjuring up Miami, New York, and finally, Paris--home of the bird market that played such a prominent role in the stories her grandfather told her. This book succeeds on every level. You'll learn a lot about birds and about our relation to them. You'll learn about families and friendship and love. You'll lose yourself in this book and not regret a single minute of it. Highly, highly recommended.

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