

BOOKreview

Blackbird Flying: A Memoir

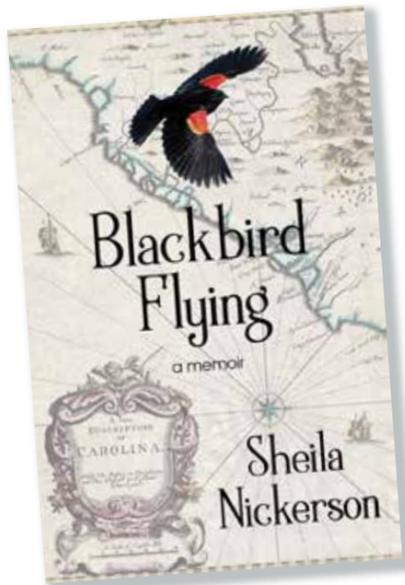
Reviewed by Judy Hogan

BLACKBIRD FLYING is more about aging than a memoir. As it's ordered, it's a myth. Symbols in a narrative. Sheila Nickerson sees the crowds of red-winged blackbirds when young, and the birds continue to return for winters in the South Carolina Low Country. Among birds, they cope unusually well when their territory no longer affords forage or the swampy salt water where they like to build their nests. They move on, and as a species, they are polygamous—can have many mates. They lay eggs and raise young two or three times a year. They are survivors.

Nickerson likens them to her family, who left Ireland during the potato famine of the middle 1800s and settled in New York City, became wealthy entrepreneurs but fell into weakness, alcoholism, and in the case of the women, often lost their memories.

When hard times came again, they migrated again. They kept moving west, and she and her husband Martin ended up in Juneau, Alaska.

Through the years, the family visited their South Carolina home on Lady Island, part of the Intracoastal Waterway near Beaufort, and Sheila returns there to see the birds, to plot her way forward, and to think about the early naturalists, John White [1540?-1606?], Governor of the lost Roanoke Colony; John Lawson [?-1711] who came to early Charleston and would write "A New Voyage to Carolina", and Mark Catesby [c. 1683-1749] who landed in Williamsburg, VA, and made drawings



of both birds and the plants in their lives ("The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands"). These men recorded in words and paintings the bird life, the other creatures, and even some words from the indigenous people's languages. Some traces of their pioneer works survive, but all those men were lost, killed, or prevented by the situation in England from returning to the new world that fascinated them. They become her guides in her mission to learn "the world's name and the name of the world to come" [p. 25]

Yet, even with the risk of being killed by the indigenous people or lost in myriad other ways, they kept going into the

unknown. They come out of their past to represent Nickerson's future. Feeling alone now, the oldest in her maternal family, her mother and brother, gone; her son alienated, she would travel into her future. She asks where do those lost ones go? Where do their memories go? She visits mediums who bring back the voices of the dead, but she isn't sure she will meet her lost ones where she is going. She's fascinated by the phenomena of the Fata Morgana, when visions appear out of the past because of a trick of the light, like seeing The Flying Dutchman on the horizon in Alaska. Like the red-winged blackbird, she'll take her chance, as she goes into the immensity of the universe, not certain that any traces of her or her story will be left.

Nickerson gives us one myth for the end of our lives, but there is no certainty here, and little hope. There is only courage to keep flying forward. She doesn't talk about all the books she has written or all the people who have read and loved her books. On certain websites you will find more about her and her books. She lived in Alaska 27 years and was one of their Poet Laureates. She taught poetry to children, to university students, and to prisoners. She also wrote of the Alaskan wilderness. There will be seeds left, Sheila, on the web and in the hearts of the living.

Judy Hogan is a poet, mystery novelist, and freelance writer living in Moncure, fighting coal ash, gardening, and keeping hens.

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