The Birds

Daphne du Maurier

About the author

Daphne du Maurier was a member of a notable Anglo-French family. Her grandfather, George du Maurier, was a novelist and artist. Her father, Sir Gerald du Maurier, was a famous actor-manager. Born in London in 1907, du Maurier was educated at home with her two sisters. However, she hated the glamorous theatrical life of her parents. When she was thirty-four, she wrote *Gerald*, a biography of her father, in which she described her father as an empty and superficial man – although she clearly loved him dearly.

From an early age, du Maurier was only truly happy when she was reading by herself. She started writing in her teens, but her career as a novelist didn't start until she visited Cornwall, in the south-west of England, at the age of twenty. Cornwall, with its wild seas and rocky coastline, inspired du Maurier. She realised that she had found her spiritual home and the natural outdoors life that she had always wanted to live. From that point onwards, she felt that she knew what kind of books she wanted to write.

Du Maurier's first novel was a romance called *The Loving Spirit*. It was published when she was twenty-four. A year later, in 1932, she married Sir Frederick Browning, nicknamed 'Boy', a war hero and Olympic athlete. The couple's wedding was like a scene from one of du Maurier's novels. They married in a small church on the Cornish coast before loading a boat with stores and setting out on the open seas on their honeymoon. They finally settled down in Cornwall, where they had two daughters and a son.

In 1936, at the age of twenty-nine, du Maurier used Cornwall's wild weather and natural beauty for the setting of her third novel, *Jamaica Inn*. The book was instantly successful. By the time her next novel was published, a romance called *Rebecca* (1938), du Maurier had won an enormous readership for herself. The book told the story of a young bride haunted by the memory of her husband's first wife. In 1948, du Maurier had to face charges of plagiarism in a New York court. She was accused of stealing the story of *Rebecca* from another author. However, the charge was unsuccessful – it was agreed by the court that the 'second wife' plot was very common in modern literature.

Over the next twenty years, du Maurier wrote historical novels, short stories and stories of mystery and suspense. Nearly all of her fourteen novels became bestsellers. In 1952, she was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. After the death of her husband in 1965, she hardly ever left Cornwall, almost living the life of a recluse. In 1969, she was created a Dame of the British Empire. She died in 1989.

Summary

*The Birds* is probably Daphne du Maurier's most famous story. It became an instant classic, delivering a haunting plot that built slowly and terrifyingly to an unforgettable climax. The famous director Alfred Hitchcock turned du Maurier's story into a classic film in 1963.

Pages 1–30

The story begins in December. Nat Hocken, a farm worker, has noticed that crowds of birds are gathering above the beach. Later the same night, the birds fly through the open windows of his house and attack him and his children. Nat fights them off, killing about fifty of them. Listening to the radio the following morning, he and his wife discover that thousands of birds are attacking people all over the country. Nat boards up his windows with wood. The birds attack again and succeed in breaking into one of the bedrooms.

Pages 31–39

In the morning, the tide goes out and the birds retreat. The radio is silent. Nat hurries over to the farm where he works. Everyone at the farm has been killed by the birds. However, the birds don't attack Nat as he walks home – they are full. He and his wife sit down for lunch. They have enough food and firewood to stay in the house for three or four days. They start to believe that they are going to be able to survive – until the birds attack the house again!
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Background and themes

Storytelling: More than anything else, Daphne du Maurier was a storyteller. She wrote page-turners – stories that were hard to put down. Many second-rate storytellers are capable of writing page-turners, but du Maurier’s stories go deeper, dealing with people’s primitive fears and longings. After her death in 1989, The Times newspaper described her books as containing ‘some of the abiding fantasies of the human race’.

History and suspense: Du Maurier’s major novels fall into two categories. The first category consists of historical novels set in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Cornwall, Jamaica Inn (1936), Frenchman’s Creek (1941), Hungry Hill (1943) and The King’s General (1946) are fine examples of du Maurier’s historical novels. They are full of smuggling, violence and (of course) romance. The second category consists of modern stories of mystery and suspense. Many of du Maurier’s short stories fall into this category. The Birds and Don’t Look Now are outstanding examples of du Maurier’s talent for suspense. She builds the tension slowly but surely until the reader realises that there is no way out for the characters.

Cinematic storytelling: Du Maurier’s novels and short stories contain compelling storylines, powerful characterisations and highly visual scenes. They were seemingly made for the cinematic screen, and in fact, a number of her stories were adapted into successful feature films, including The Birds, Jamaica Inn, Don’t Look Now, Frenchman’s Creek and Hungry Hill (for which she co-wrote the screenplay). Two of the films were directed by Alfred Hitchcock, the famous British film director. Produced in 1940, Rebecca starred the world-famous British actor, Sir Lawrence Olivier. Like the novel on which it was based, the film is riveting. It eventually earned Hitchcock a highly coveted Academy Award for Best Picture. The Birds, produced in 1963, was a free adaptation of du Maurier’s short story, but Hitchcock was known as the true ‘master of suspense’, and so the film contains some truly terrifying – indeed, genuinely horrifying – moments. Both The Birds and Rebecca are fitting tributes to du Maurier’s vast storytelling powers.

Discussion activities

Pages 1–10

Before reading

1 Discuss: Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. Do you think that this is a good cover for the book? Why or why not? What do you like about the cover? Why do you like it? What don’t you like about the cover? Why don’t you like it?

2 Write: Read out to the class the information about Daphne du Maurier in the introduction to the book. Then put students into small groups and tell them that they have ten minutes to write down as many facts about the author as possible. Make the exercise a competition – the group that writes down the most facts is the winner.

3 Research: Ask students to bring information about birds to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

After reading

4 Pair work: Put students into pairs and have them look up the word reason in a dictionary. Then get them to think of reasons why Nat is afraid of the birds. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and share the reasons with their classmates.

5 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 3. What is happening in the picture? Where do you think Nat is in the picture? Why do you think this? How do you think he is feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think he is thinking about? Why do you think this?

6 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of one of the birds from pages 1 to 10. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and show their picture to the rest of the class. They should explain why they have drawn the bird the way that they have drawn it.

Pages 11–20

Before reading

7 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Nat and his family on pages 11 to 20. Will they be attacked by the birds again? Will they be injured? Will they stay in their home? Will they run away?

8 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 11. What is Nat doing in the picture? Why do you think he is doing it? Do you think he is right or wrong to do it? Why do you think this?

After reading

9 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Nat and his family on pages 11 to 20. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
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10 **Role play:** Put students into pairs. Student A is Nat and Student B is Nat's wife. Nat's wife should ask Nat questions about the bird attacks and Nat should answer them. Nat's wife should also ask Nat what he thinks will happen next and what he suggests that they do about the situation. Nat should answer his wife's questions as honestly and as completely as possible. When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play their conversation in front of the class.

11 **Artwork:** Get students to draw a picture of a scene from pages 11 to 20. When they have finished, the students should stand at the front of the class and describe their picture to their classmates.

12 **Role play:** Write the word *broadcast* on the board and teach students what it means. Then put them into pairs and get them to role play a radio broadcast about the bird attacks that are happening all over the country. Point out to students that they can use their imagination – that they don't have to limit themselves to the events described in the book. When they have finished, the pairs should role play their radio broadcast in front of the class. Finally, take a vote to see which radio broadcast is the class's favourite.

Pages 21–30

**Before reading**

13 **Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 25. What is Nat's wife doing in the picture? Why do you think she is doing it? How do you think she is feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think she is thinking about? Why do you think this?

14 **Write:** Write the following combinations of letters on the board – they are anagrams of words that can be found on pages 21 to 30. Get students to spell the words correctly. When they have finished, some of the students should stand at the front of the class and read the words to their classmates.

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a  neelb
b  nafm
c  dwin
d  drak
e  rief
f  ngusi
g  ddae
h  aes
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**After reading**

15 **Discuss:** How are the birds in the story different from birds in real life? Write this question on the board and get students to discuss it in pairs. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and share their answers with their classmates.

16 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word *brave* in a dictionary. Students should ask each other which character is the bravest in *The Birds*. They should give reasons for their choice. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and re-enact their conversation for their classmates.

Pages 31–39

**Before reading**

17 **Write:** Write the word *imagine* on the board and teach students what it means. Then put them into pairs and ask them to imagine that help comes for Nat and his family. Get them to write a story to describe how Nat and his family are saved. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and read their stories to their classmates. Finally, take a vote to see which story is the class's favourite.

**After reading**

18 **Discuss:** Get students to work in small groups and discuss the following questions:

Did you think that Nat and his family would be saved at the end of the story? Why or why not?
Were you surprised by the story's ending? Why or why not?
Have you read any other stories that don't have a happy ending? If so, which ones?
Do you like stories that don't have a happy ending? Why or why not?
What do you think happens to Nat and his family in the future? Do you think they will ever be saved? Why do you think this?

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to [www.penguinreaders.com](http://www.penguinreaders.com).