



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Stewart, Michael

King Crow

Original Citation

Stewart, Michael (2011) King Crow. Bluemoose Books, Hebden Bridge. ISBN 9780956687616

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/15069/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

Starlings

When I look at people, I wonder what sort of birds they are. A photograph of the headmaster, Mr Hulmes, stares down from the display board. His profile reminds me of a long-eared owl, with his large round face and flat nose, bushy eyebrows like the erect blackish ear-tufts of the bird.

Perhaps I've studied the board too long because when I turn round, I'm on my own. I get to the end of the corridor and I'm confronted by a gang of boys and girls. One of the girls is dragging another girl by her hair across the floor. The girl must be about twelve. I turn back, but now some of the gang are behind me. I'm trapped.

I watch as they kick the girl. One of them films it on his phone. Her pleading eyes, her mouth like a gash of fear. Kick, kick, kick. What now? Finches. Focus on finches. Come on, think. The goldfinch. Think about the goldfinch. I think the goldfinch is one of the prettiest birds in the world. The European goldfinch I'm talking about. I've seen American goldfinches in books and they're nothing like as pretty – yellow and black rather than gold. Not that the European goldfinch is really gold, it's not gold at all, but the combination of red face, black and white head and yellow and black wings is very striking. I have a special seed feeder to attract them in the yard, although, as we have just moved in, I've not yet succeeded there. Shame really, because by the time we left the last place there were swarms of them, regular as clockwork.

Block out the girl. Teachers, where are they? I imagine Mr Hulmes swooping down, silent, grasping the predators. The girl tries to cover her face with her hands. Where are the teachers?

What other finches have I seen? Well, obviously greenfinch and chaffinch. I see them all the time. When we lived the other side of Salford, towards Ordsall Park, we used to get quite a few hawfinch. Not that many really. Hardly any at all. Well, none. When we went to Bangor a few years ago, before mum got with Tina and we went on holidays, I'm sure I saw a twite. Never seen a rosefinch or a redpoll – but I live in hope. The fight, the noise. Keep thinking finches. Scarlet rosefinch, mottled brown with streaked breast. And that rose colour, almost red. I like the finches very much. I like their bills – they all have good short, strong bills. Very well adapted for eating seeds.

This boy swaggers over. He has hair like straw and grey eyes. Navy blue, white, crimson tie. The ringleader.

—Face on him, he says. —Proper face on him. And he laughs to one of the others. Then he says to me, —Yeah? Want some, new boy?

I feel his breath on my face. Focus on his blazer, a darkening sky. The finches fly off and are replaced by starlings, triangular wings, twisting and soaring, a swirling black cloud. A falcon swoops, stark, into the cloud. The cloud explodes. Remember to breathe. Think about starlings. Think.

People often overlook the starling. I think that's a shame. Just because they're common doesn't mean they aren't fascinating. What I like more than anything else is their sociability. This can sometimes be mistaken for aggression, but I reckon one goes with the other – you see people piling out of the Brown Cow on Friday evenings and you'll know what I mean.

A lot of ornithologists go for the rare find. They are only happy if they spot a red-flanked blue tit or a buff-bellied pipit, say. But to me that's missing the point. Why not enjoy what's all around? If you live in Weaste, like I do, you might as well pray for manna as go looking for a short-toed treecreeper or a paddyfield warbler. I prefer the dandelion to the orchid and I love starlings.

It's easy to dismiss them as just another medium sized dull bird. But actually they're not black, but iridescent with blues, purples, greens, and a sort of a metallic sheen to it – like when you see a puddle where engine oil has leaked into it. The most interesting thing about the starling for me is their ability to copy the sounds around them, including car alarms, mobile phones and even the woman over the road who comes out at teatime to screech at her kids, —Emma! Hayley! Yer chips are getting cold!

It's because they are able to adapt to their surroundings, that they have been so successful – so why should other ornithologists be so sniffy about that and favour birds that aren't as successful? It's just snobbery, if you ask me.

There were about eight or nine of them on my table this morning before school. I put out some of the stale bread ends from last week. I roughly cut them up and soaked them in water. You're not supposed to put dry bread out because it can swell up inside their stomachs and cause all kinds of problems. The tits and the finches made way for them and pretty soon the starlings were the only birds left.

There wasn't enough room for them all on my table so they took it in turns, queuing up along the washing line, flapping impatiently, sometimes squabbling about whose turn it was. I watched without thinking of the time. I made rough sketches of their activity, then looking over to the clock on the DVD recorder I noticed it was eight thirty. If I was to get to school on time I'd have to set off now, but I couldn't resist one last look at them as I grabbed my bag and my coat. I shouted up to mum, but she didn't hear me. Since she got with Tina, she doesn't get up in the morning any more to see me off. The door was on the latch, so I just had to close it gently behind me. I keep my key on a piece of string around my neck. I checked it was there before closing the door.

At the bus stop there were about five or six of my lot – Roseway School kids. They eyed me up but I pretended not to notice and stuck my head in my field guide. I knew they were

Roseway kids because they all wore navy blue blazers with the emblem, Roseway School: working together. I raised my head from my book and caught them eyeing me again. There was a girl of about fifteen and she nudged her friend and they giggled. I thought my zip might be undone but it wasn't. I could feel heat rising in my cheeks as I ducked behind my guide.

This is day three at my new school. There was a bloke at the bus stop with a baseball cap and four cans of Special Brew this morning. He had the small eyes and stooped gait of a cattle egret. He opened one of the cans and took a swig from it. He held one up for me but I shook my head. I rummaged for my sketchbook but when I found it I changed my mind and stuffed it back in my bag. I wanted to draw a quick sketch of him clinging to the beer can, but I was afraid he would ask me what I was doing. He stared at me so much that I was relieved when the school bus arrived.

I got on and paid my fare. I sat down at the front next to the luggage area, to make sure that no one could sit next to me. The bus was full of Roseway kids. Some of them would have made interesting studies but the bus was jolting too much for me to get my sketchbook out. They were noisy and played music through their mobile phones – mostly garage, bassline and niche sounds. I opened my book and pretended to read.

Day one, a Friday. Had the day off on Thursday, helping mum with the move. Arriving at the school I noticed the razor wire surrounding the fence, with a Care Bear garrotted by the razor wire. At the time, I'd wondered how long the bear had been there, but now, standing in this corridor, the ring leader's breath hot on my face, his spit on my cheek, I'm totting up how long *I've* got to do. Don't think about the ringleader, think about days, times, dates. Things you can count.

It's March, and school finishes in July. Four months. Four letters in June and July, five in March, but only three in May. Right now, I need to get through the next three minutes. Don't move. Don't speak. Don't look him in the eye. Navy blue sleeve.

Focus on those few months left and imagine they are a navy blue sleeve.

—This is Paul Cooper, the teacher said, holding me up like an item for auction, like those blokes with weird jackets on daytime TV. All the class seemed to be united in disapproval. They wouldn't be buying this lot number. — I'm sure you'll all make him feel welcome, he said. I could feel my cheeks going robin red. I looked at them all in rows staring back at me like the seabirds at Bempton cliffs, then I looked at my shoes.

The number three. Three posters on the wall. The third one is the school rules. Three rules. Rule number three: always have three bars of your tie showing at all times. Three letters in May, three days you've been here. Three days in and you still don't know where the classrooms are. Your timetable does not include a map although there is a plan of the building near the entrance of the school, which is why you are here now, trapped. You got lost and headed back to the main hall. You found the plan, worked out a route, then you got distracted by the display board, in particular Mr Hulmes's bushy eyebrows. Only got yourself to blame. When the bell went, it hardly even registered. There were others around but then you were on your own.

Nowhere to run. I'm worried I'll wet myself and they'll all see. He's up close now, the ringleader boy with the straw coloured hair like a black-necked grebe's face-tufts. He is shouting, bunched fists, he's about to whack me one, I tense, get ready. Then a boy appears from the other end of the corridor. He's taller and broader with short black hair. He seems to shimmer with the light behind him from the end of the corridor. He gives a quick look round, surveying the lie of the land. He smiles, the light making his outline silver, then he swanks across and the ring leader boy is backing off. The rest of the gang have flown.

The boy outlined with silver light is thinking how small the ringleader boy is. The ringleader boy shrinks in his presence,

like the silver light is pressing down on his lungs, squashing all the air out of his chest, making him small and dull.

And now the ringleader boy backs off some more. He sort of smiles at me in front of the silver swanking boy, like he's apologising. The swanking boy could split his head in two with his fist. He could bust his nose with the flick of his finger. Blood, an explosion of crimson liquid spraying out. The swanking boy could throw him across the room with one hand, he could smash him into the wall. The ringleader boy would crumple. He would make a noise like a tin of lager being prised open. The silver boy could get him on the floor with one push and kick him in the head. But the silver-black head of the boy does not move, his fist does not clench, his boot does not rise. He does not need to raise his hand, he does not need to raise a finger or an eyebrow. He just needs to stand there and the ringleader boy has gone. The corridor is empty apart from me and the shining silver boy.

—You new here? He asks me, as though just passing the time of day. I nod. My mouth has gone dry, so I don't risk speaking.

The boy just shrugs, like he couldn't care less. He struts off. I watch him leave. There is such confidence in his gait. Everything seems clearer, the colours of the posters along the corridors, brighter. I feel jittery and light headed, like I've just slugged a glass of whisky. I look over to where the ringleader boy was. He is lucky to have gone. He is lucky not to be on the floor in a puddle of his own thick blood. The girl who they were kicking has gone too. Drops of blood, a clump of hair on the floor of the corridor. The floor marked with signs, keep to the left, lines marking where to walk. I think about the redpoll again. Its bright red forehead. And the rosefinch, so much red around its face, breast and rump. There's the goldfinch too. Whoever called it the goldfinch, definitely wasn't looking at its face.

I find a bench to perch on in the cloakrooms. My legs have gone weak and my head is buzzing. I can feel the blood squirt through my veins. I feel it pulse behind my eyes. I lean back

against the wall, hard and cold and solid. The school seems more substantial than the last one. It's made out of brick. The last school I was at was made out of plasterboard because it was built on a marsh. Great areas for bird life, are marshes. I can only guess at the devastation the building of the school must have caused. Warblers, gulls, coots, maybe even a bittern. No, of course not a bittern. Not in Salford. Bitterns are usually southerners, very shy and difficult ones at that.

Although the school was only thirty years old, the science labs had sunk so much that they were on the same level as the all-weather pitch. There were holes in the walls along the corridors where people had kicked them. This place is more like an open prison, with harsh lighting, bare brick walls, high fences and razor wire.

I open my book, A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe. The first page is missing because I had to tear it out. It had a library stamp. I took it from Salford library when I was ten. I've had to Sellotape some of the pages together. The Sellotape has darkened to the colour of vinegar. I like the way the book is organised. There's an introduction and a preface, then lots of background stuff on topography and even lists of ornithological societies. But the best bit is the checklist. Eight pages listing all the birds in order of nomenclature rather than alphabetically. I tried explaining this to my English teacher at the previous school but she didn't know what nomenclature meant and I got detention.

By each bird is a little box you can tick. I've managed to tick off 187 I've seen in the wild. Seeing them in sanctuaries doesn't count. There's a total of 636 birds, but a good number of these aren't native to Britain, nor are they visitors, so I reckon I've seen about half the birds on the list so I'm doing ok. As I look down the list, I see that I've not ticked the box next to sanderling. I take out my pencil and tick the box. I saw several sanderling last year along the Dee estuary, a small, plump, energetic little bird. So that's 188 birds. I write my score in the

margin. As I do, I spot a bag stuffed under one of the benches. I'm about to open it when I see a teacher approaching. I shove it into my inside pocket.

—Shouldn't you be in class? What are you doing here?

Not a teacher of mine I don't think. I've managed to produce some saliva now, so I answer him, —Er, I'm new. I'm not sure where I'm supposed to be.

—Where's your timetable?

I put my book away and root for it in my bag. I hand it to him. He scrutinises it. —Double Maths, he says, —Mr Wilson, room number E14. It's this way, come on.

He waits for me to get up and then walks me to the room. All eyes are on me as he opens the door and we walk in. He says something to the teacher, this Mr Wilson, and Mr Wilson looks me up and down. I'm in luck because this teacher leaves and Mr Wilson escorts me to a spare seat, next to the swanking boy. He stares out of the window and doesn't acknowledge me. He just stares out of the window, his outline black and silver. I sit down and get out my book. His short black glossy hair coupled with his fearlessness, makes me think of a number of the corvids. So I look at this boy, and I wonder what bird he is.