

Helen Humphreys is the author of four books of poetry, six novels, and two works of creative non-fiction. She was born in Kingston-on-Thames, England, and now lives in Kingston, Ontario.

Her first novel, *Leaving Earth* (1997), won the City of Toronto Book Award and was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. Her second novel, *Afterimage* (2000), won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, was nominated for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. Her third novel, *The Lost Garden* (2002), was a 2003 *Canada Reads* selection, a national bestseller, and was also a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. *Wild Dogs* (2004) won the Lambda Prize for fiction, has

been optioned for film, and was produced as a stage play at CanStage in Toronto in the fall of 2008. *Coventry* (2008) was a national bestseller and was shortlisted for the Trillium Book Award and the Canadian Authors Association Award for Fiction. It was also a *New York Times* Editors' Choice. *The Reinvention of Love* (2011) was longlisted for the Dublin Impac Literary Award and shortlisted for the Canadian Authors Association Award for Fiction. Her latest novel, *The Evening Chorus* was published in February of 2015.

Humphreys' work of creative non-fiction, *The Frozen Thames* (2007), was a #1 national bestseller. Her collections of poetry include *Gods and Other Mortals* (1986); *Nuns Looking Anxious, Listening to Radios* (1990); and, *The Perils of Geography* (1995). Her most recent collection, *Anthem* (1999), won the Canadian Authors Association Award for Poetry. Her most recent work of non-fiction is *Nocturne* (2013), a memoir about the life and death of her brother, Martin.

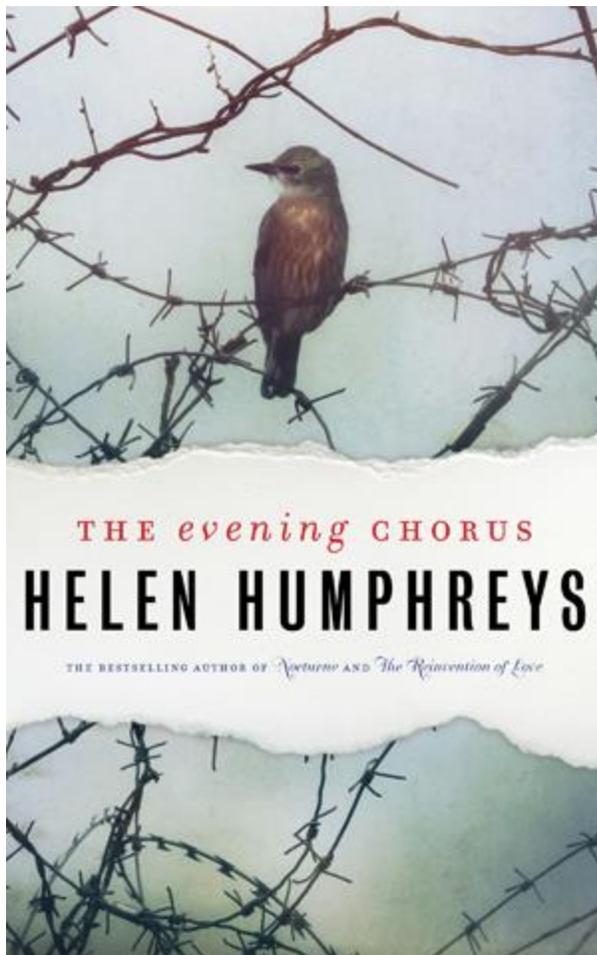
In 2009 Helen Humphreys was awarded the Harbourfront Festival Prize for literary excellence.

Helen Humphreys' fiction is published in Canada by HarperCollins, and in the U.S. by W.W. Norton and Harcourt Houghton Mifflin. Her UK publisher is Serpent's Tail and her Italian publisher is Playground.

The Evening Chorus
Helen Humphreys
HarperCollins Canada
304 pp ; \$29

The scene: one man—a soft-spoken RAF pilot in training, specifically—in a Bavarian POW camp filled with two thousand other male prisoners circa 1940. What happens next?

A plan of escape with astronomical odds for success? An equally dangerous rescue attempt? A tense contest (Allies vs Axis) of wills? Terrible brutality and carnage?



For anyone reared on the pervasive cinematic tropes of World War II—whether Tarantino’s pulpy amorality in *Inglorious Bastards* or Spielberg’s high-mindedness in *Saving Private Ryan*—each of these answers makes sense. After all, war stories are always about heroic efforts and deadly conflict, right?

How about dutiful note-taking while observing a family of nesting redstarts?

Bird-watching: yes, that's the answer initially proposed by Helen Humphreys in *The Evening Chorus*.

You might, like me think there's no hobby less interesting than gawking at a bird as it sits on a tree branch. And, like me, your prejudice might encourage you to doubt *The Evening Chorus*, with its pretty cover featuring a sparrow-like creature resting on a strand of barbed wire. Just as I was, though, your snap judgment would be wrong, egregiously so.

Absorbing, richly characterized, and marked by smart, delightful twists and turns, the novel's fruitful visitation of war and its aftermath never fails to captivate. If there is such a thing as a cultural vocabulary of war, Humphreys adds welcome new words to it.

In "Redstart," the novel's expansive opening chapter, Humphreys introduces solitary James Hunter, known as the Birdman, and "the arithmetic of the camp."

Imprisoned and louse-bitten but protected, more or less, by the Geneva Conventions, the men get by. Some of them fight for escape (and try but fail with tunneling). The rest, like James, are resigned to an uncertain fate.

Aware of wire fencing that cannot be crossed for any reason and mind-numbing boredom, the captives get creative: debates, theatrical performances, reading, makeshift golf, and gardening. Spotting a bird family outside the fence, James, a teacher in England, focusses on study. Besides giving him clear purpose, he believes (as he indicates in descriptive letters to his wife Rose in England) that immersion in the natural world, one of his commonalities with her, will keep the new marriage vital.

Humphreys reminds readers of both the deprivation and the heightened emotions of war

Though camp scenes are often fraternal and leisurely (James also forms a complicated friendship with the camp's Kommandment, a former university professor named Christoph), Humphreys reminds readers of both the deprivation and the heightened emotions of war, as when a prisoner whose whistling irritates a guard is shot dead. A sudden forced march concludes the atmospheric chapter.

With that fraught development, Humphreys crosses the Channel, switching her attention to the routines of Rose and James' sister Enid, which are of course regulated by war.

In a cramped rural cottage facing Ashdown Forest, a former hunting park for Henry VIII, Rose tends to chickens, a Victory Garden, and her new dog. Loyal, she nightly volunteers for the war effort; the hours are long and introspective. But with the strangely

freeing solitude and the reality of her husband growing dim, doubt about their bond's legitimacy grows. A handsome soldier stationed nearby doesn't help matters.

Evacuating a bombed-out flat in London, meanwhile, Enid's also fleeing scandal: an affair with a married fellow, who died in her company, during an air raid.

As depicted by Humphreys, the resulting stay with Rose (the women are barely acquainted) is heavy with tension and deceit as well as bright with tentative friendship. Undisclosed private affairs draw the women together but simultaneously hold them apart.

About two-thirds through, Humphreys shifts to 1950, and in the concluding set of five page-turning chapters she surveys the radically altered lives of characters in England and Germany.

From alcoholism, domestic misery, and a suicidal resolve to a touching but top secret same-sex romance, the characters are beset with a host of less-than-ideal circumstances resulting from moments experienced and decisions acted upon a decade earlier. The dim post-war days of Rose and James in particular are directly shaped by the separation that began in 1940.

In highlighting the wondrous (if at times vexing) unknowability of our lives — that a sudden impulsive idea, or a decision to turn left instead of right, can usher in unforeseeable consequences — *The Evening Chorus* artfully imagines how that might play out for one quartet. And with her usual faultless eloquence, Helen Humphreys makes our witnessing of their causes and effects memorably instructive.

Brett Josef Grubisic is the author of *The Age of Cities and This Location of Unknown Possibilities*. A university lecturer, he lives in Vancouver.

Taken from *The National Post* February 23, 2015

Helen Humphreys's *The Evening Chorus* is a formally conventional but satisfying yarn

EMILY DONALDSON

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Feb. 20, 2015 12:16PM EST

Last updated Friday, Feb. 20, 2015 12:17PM EST

- Title *The Evening Chorus*
- Author Helen Humphreys
- Genre fiction
- Publisher HarperCollins
- Pages 294 pages
- Price \$28.99
- Year 2015

Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong*, Jack Higgins's *The Eagle Has Landed*, Farley Mowat's *And No Birds Sang*, Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* – authors writing about war have been succumbing to the temptation to “put a bird on it” long before the *Portlandia* skit. And the tendency doesn't apply just to books. *Birdsong* is an important element in Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* (the inspiration for Johanna Skibsrud's recent novel of the same name), written when the French composer was held prisoner by the Nazis during the Second World War.

And no wonder. When it comes to war, birds – symbolism-wise – pretty much have it all. At the (literally) hawkish end of the spectrum you've got your birds of prey: eagles, falcons and aforesaid hawks. If it's more delicate, nuanced ironies you're after, on the other hand, you can't do better than songbirds, which sing their hearts out in the height of battle and fly merrily about in full view of prison camps, apparently oblivious to our suffering.

The cover of Helen Humphreys's new novel, *The Evening Chorus*, with its songbird delicately perched on a length of barbed wire that could double for a thorny branch, plays on the latter juxtapositions. Those who complain endlessly that there are no good roles for birds in novels these days, that they function merely as metaphoric eye candy, however, will be pleasantly surprised when they crack the spine of Humphreys's book. Here, a family of redstarts assumes a starring role for nearly 100 pages when an RAF officer named James Hunter (one of three characters whose triangulated perspectives make up the tale) decides to make their study a means to fill long, structureless days in a German PoW camp.

James's activities soon draw the attention of the camp Kommandant, who summons him for questioning. After establishing that James isn't plotting his escape, the Kommandant proves

unexpectedly supportive of his prisoner's newfound hobby: He presents James with a guide to German birds and, later, drives him to some local woods to observe a rare gathering of cedar waxwings.

In letters home, James tries to share his enthusiasm for the redstarts with his wife, Rose. But alas, Rose's own eye is trained on a bird of a different feather; namely, an officer on leave named Toby. As we get to know Rose during her time at the narrative helm, however, our knee-jerk condemnation is mollified somewhat. She and James were practically newlyweds when he went overseas, and there appears to be some credence to her conviction that Toby, with his laddish *joie de vivre*, is more temperamentally suited to her than the benign but nerdy James.

But now James's sister Enid, whose London home has been bombed, has asked if she can come stay with Rose, thus temporarily putting a cold shower on the affair. Rose, unsurprisingly, resents the intrusion. Slowly though, the two women forge a kind of intimacy, especially after Rose discovers that, relationship-wise, they're in a similar predicament. The problem is that Rose cannot divulge this to her sister-in-law until she asks James for a divorce, at which point Enid will presumably want nothing to do with her.

Humphreys has written about the Second World War before, in 2008's *Coventry*, a novel that shares with this one a penchant for meaningful coincidence (both also have scenes in which a white horse appears from nowhere). That coincidences are more readily acceptable in life than they are in novels, where they're often regarded as unrealistic, or a narrative crutch, is one of many unfair things that authors have to grapple with. Regrettably, it's one Humphreys decides to ignore on a couple of occasions – one being when Rose's dog drops physical evidence of one character's entirely foreseeable death (and in case you didn't foresee it, it's presaged by a bird flying into Rose's cottage) in her actual hand – with cringeworthy results.

Though Humphreys's prose is characteristically elegant and restrained, from time to time she allows the novel's avian theme to get out of hand. The Kommandant's chest is "puffed out like a winter robin's;" the laughter of Nazi guards "spools like birdsong through the air;" one of James's fellow prisoners, whose death provides the novel's most genuinely shocking moment, is whistling "like a bird" when he's cut down by a German officer. Rose whistling to her dog is described as being "like the cry of a mournful, solitary bird."

The Evening Chorus, when all is said and done, is a formally conventional but for the most part satisfying yarn; a quiet novel about a calamitous event whose most trenchant passages show the cast of Humphreys's poet's eye: "The song of the redstart begins as a melody and ends in dissonance, as though the song itself comes undone in the process of singing it, finishing up with all the right notes presented in the completely wrong order."

Emily Donaldson is a freelance critic and editor.

Discussion Questions (*taken from readinggroupguides.com*)

The Evening Chorus

by Helen Humphreys

1. The novel opens with James Hunter in a German POW camp during World War II. He is one of approximately 2,000 prisoners. How do the prisoners pass the time while they are in the camp? How do their choice of activities divide the men?
 2. James forms an unlikely friendship while he is a prisoner of war. What is the common ground that unites these two very different men?
 3. The men in the POW camp write letters home to their loved ones, and they depend on receiving letters back to maintain their morale. What is the mistake that James makes when corresponding with his young wife, Rose?
 4. Rose and James married in haste at the start of the war, as many couples did back then. James's absence takes its toll on the marriage, and Rose strays. Should she have given the marriage more of a chance? What would she have discovered if she had?
 5. When James's sister, Enid, is forced to come and stay with Rose in the country after being bombed out of her London flat, what does she do to pass the days and keep herself sane while she is there?
 6. The second half of the novel takes place after the war. What has happened to the three main characters? Are they more happy, or less happy, in the postwar years?
 7. What is the role of the natural world in the novel?
 8. There is a 10-year gap between the first part of the novel and the second. How does the passing of time offer perspective and alter how the characters feel about their actions in the first part of the story? What have they learned from this passage of time?
 9. The war has changed the lives of everyone in the story. If there had been no war, what do you think the lives of James, Rose and Enid would have been like?
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