



The Peregrine: The Hill of Summer Diaries: The Complete Works of J. A. Baker

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Reissue of J. A. Baker's extraordinary classic of British nature writing.

Despite the association of peregrines with the wild, outer reaches of the British Isles, The Peregrine is set on the flat marshes of the Essex coast, where J A Baker spent a long winter looking and writing about the visitors from the uplands – peregrines that spend the winter hunting the huge flocks of pigeons and waders that share the desolate landscape with them.

Including original diaries from which The Peregrine was written and its companion volume The Hill of Summer, this is a beautiful compendium of lyrical nature writing at its absolute best.

Such luminaries as Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane, Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion have cited this as one of the most important books in 20th Century nature writing, and the bestselling author Mark Cocker has provided an introduction on the importance of Baker, his writings and the diaries – creating the essential volume of Baker's writings.

Since the hardback was published in 2010, papers, maps, and letters have come to light which in turn provide a little more background into J A Baker's history. Contemporaries – particularly from while he was at school in Chelmsford – have kindly provided insights, remembering a school friend who clearly made an impact on his generation. In the longer term, there is hope of an archive of these papers being established, but in the meantime, and with the arrival of this paperback edition, there is a chance to reveal a little more of what has been learned.

Among fragments of letters to Baker was one from a reader who praised a piece that Baker had written in RSPB Birds magazine in 1971. Apart from a paper on peregrines which Baker wrote for the Essex Bird Report, this article – entitled On the Essex Coast – appears to be his only other published piece of writing, and, with the kind agreement of the RSPB, it has been included in this updated new paperback edition of Baker's astounding work.

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Details

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From Reader Review The Peregrine: The Hill of Summer Diaries: The Complete Works of J. A. Baker for online ebook

Ben Winch says

I'm not a scientist, not much of a scholar either, and I have little of the scientist's or scholar's regard for cold hard facts. True, I'm apt to quote (occasionally) biographical details of artists' lives, but these facts interest me solely for the light they shed on the art, which interests me (for the most part) because facts don't feature in it, because (for the most part) it's divorced from what we call "real life". So it was with some disappointment that I realised this book, *The Peregrine*, was non-fiction, rather than the *Mount Analogue*-like (not that I've read *Mount Analogue*, but I have my conception of it) experimental novel of a writer's return to nature which I'd imagined it to be when friend Fionnuala recommended it. Not that I wasn't flattered by the recommendation once I'd read the prose – which seemed to put paid to all my notions of drawing-room British stuffiness – as well as mystified that of all the topics my distant-internet-friend could have chosen for her non-fiction recommendation to me she'd hit on birds. (At the time, my totemic part-bird alter-ego wasn't yet publically acknowledged even to the extent that he is now, beyond a few musicians of barely less obscurity themselves.) But that prose! Listen – it almost made me lift off, so aerodynamic, so rapid its pulse:

The tide was low. Mud shone like wet sand, and shingle strands were bright and glaring in the blue lagoons. Colour smarted in the sunlight. A dead tree in dark fields reflected light, like an ivory bone. Bare trees stood in the earth, like the glowing veins of withered leaves.

A peregrine soared above the estuary, and the sky filled with the wings of waders. He dived through the darkness into a failing darkness of curlew, flashed through them into light again, curved under and rose beneath them as they rose, struck one in the breast with gasping force. It dropped beside the sea-wall, all out of shape, as though its body had been suddenly deflated. The peregrine glided down, and lanced the dead curlew's breast with the hook of his bill.

I won't lie: I never finished it. I got halfway; I loved it, at least as far as the sentences went, but ultimately sentences go only so far. Ultimately, the unfolding drama, such as it was, didn't compel me. I kept it close for months, then relegated it to the shelf – the desultory non-fiction/non-music shelf which I rarely examine – and haven't touched it since. But I mean to. In fact I think it may be invaluable. Because when it comes time for me – the non-scientist – to write about birds, I've got the masterclass waiting. Me, I could sit or stroll through the forest all day listening to the things, but I don't have the patience to seek or to watch them, much less describe them.

Line for line, some of the best action- and nature-writing I've read. One day, who knows, I may even finish it.

Andrew Spink says

These are two quite extraordinary books. On the one hand they lack a plot, there is a huge amount of repetition, especially in *The Peregrine*, where time after time the hunting by the peregrine and killing of its prey are described, and condensing ten years into one gives a strange impression that every time you step out into the countryside you could expect to see multiple rare and secretive animals, a bit like watching a natural

history program on TV. Nevertheless, I've still given it five stars. That is quite simply because of astonishingly beautiful and poetic prose. The use of language is so incredible, so creative, so forceful that feels more like a poem than a novel. And it works, you really feel what it is like to be there in the field observing the birds. Of the two books, *The Peregrine* has received the most acclaim. However, I must say that I preferred *The Hill of Summer*. That was in part because of the relentless kill after kill in *The Peregrine* got a bit much to me, but above all, because his obsession with that bird meant that the rest of what was going on got too much squeezed out. *The Hill of Summer* was in that sense much more balanced. The whole habitat was described, still with a focus on the birds, but at least the other animals and the trees were given their due, even if the rest of the plants are only a backdrop and barely mentioned. So far I have only dipped into the diaries, that's not the sort of text you want to just read, but I'm looking forward to coming back to them and reading more.

Gonzalo R says

Uno de los más claros ejemplos de lo inagotable de un tópico. El relato tiene muchísimos pasajes que juegan con el tedio y la obsesión de la observación cotidiana de Baker, pero repentinamente se transforman en acción, desesperación y desolación. El libro tiene un ritmo muy atípico, denso por momentos, pero trepidante en otros. El lector observa a los peregrinos como Baker, se aburre y se emociona al igual que él.

"Time is measured by a clock of blood. When one is active, close to the hawk, pursuing, the pulse races, time goes faster; when one is still, waiting, the pulse quietens, time is slow. Always, as one hunts for the hawk, one has an oppressive sense of time contracting inwards like a tightening spring. One hates the movement of the sun, the steady alteration of the light, the increase of hunger, the maddening metronome of the heart-beat. When one says 'ten o'clock' or 'three o'clock,' this is not the grey and shrunken time of towns; it is the memory of a certain fulmination or declension of light that was unique to that time and that place on that day, a memory as vivid to the hunter as burning magnesium. As soon as the hawk-hunter steps from his door he knows the way of the wind, he feels the weight of the air. "

T.R. says

A superb piece of nature writing: among the finest descriptions I've read of farm and forest, wader and warbler, sea and sky, hawk and hobby. Baker writes of British countryside and its birds and other wildlife in words that seem to immerse the reader in the location, in the eyes and body of the swooping falcon, in the whispering pines, in the hunting owl sailing over the landscape. Many passages about the peregrines, hobbies, and sparrowhawks are simply amazing.

This is not a book, however, for someone wondering 'what is he getting at'. There is no larger narrative, no storyline. This is a diary of observation, a perceptive detailing of nature that may appeal to those who like the music of nature and the cadence of good writing.

It is the voice Baker spending his days roaming on foot or bicycle or boat to recounting what he has seen and how he has seen. As he writes: "My life is here, where soon the larks will sing again, and there is a hawk above. One wishes only to go forward, deeper into the summer land, journeying from lark-song to lark-song, passing through the dark realm of the owls, the fox-holdings, the badger-shires, out into the brilliant winter dominion, the sea-bleak world of the hawks."

Larry Ggggggggggggggggggggggggggg says

Thanks ja Baker for teaching me about several type of bird, and writing synesthetic sentences about nature several of which I read two or three times

Michael Sarson says

It took me a long time to get through *The Peregrine* on my first reading, at least a decade ago. To call it slow would be a morbid understatement. Actually, there's more the sense of moving backward, as he draws on the mists of distant memory and some deep, personal impressions to inform the narrative the whole way through. It's unconventional stuff. You might wonder what on earth you're doing reading it. Or, you might feel as if you've come across something so strange, and so quirky and dusty and rare and idiosyncratic, that you'll call it your all-time favourite book when people ask. That's what I do now.

The Peregrine is written as a diary, as if the events he describes have occurred on a calendar day. But Baker later wrote that those events were distilled from the memories of a decade's worth of peregrine watching. So whether it's on your first, or second, or fifth reading (how long can you meditate?), you'll eventually stop following him from one day to the next. You know he's not going anywhere. And instead you go back from where you are, looking for that line about the curlews, or that passage about the deer mouse. And then forward, through the end pages of the *Peregrine* and into the *Hill of Summer*, looking for his nightjars, and that part about black, primordial voices booming like cork pulled from a cask of wine. And from then on you explore the books forward and backward, starting from anywhere, ending whenever, reading from both books at once. You'll never put them down for good, ever again. It's like they're written around you. The story turns inward like a kaleidoscope, time is memory, and whole landscapes return in recollections of light and shadow. It all becomes as perfectly real and as perfectly dynamic as your own memories of such a world as he describes.

There is something really special about how time and space work in these writings. I love them both the same. They're a meditation; a stillness of flowing water. Sit with them, eyes open, and hear the chaos come all around. And then find their silence in your day.

Wayne says

I first heard of this book on the Entitled Opinions podcast where last season there were two episodes dedicated to it, the first a conversation between host Robert Harrison and filmmaker Werner Herzog, the second between Harrison and Stanford University professor Andrea Nightingale. *THE PEREGRINE* is not the sort of book I would have sought out with any interest without having listened to these two podcast episode and hearing the passion with which these people talked about the book they described as a rediscovered classic of nature writing. Words cannot really describe the appeal of *THE PEREGRINE*. Superficially it is a journal of the author tracking the movements and hunting patterns of peregrine falcons over almost a year. Having never read or had any inclination towards reading anything that would be categorized as "nature writing" I went into this book with my respect for Herzog and Harrison as my mandate. *THE PEREGRINE* has a mysterious fascination, an enthralling and indescribably beautiful book,

prose that is highly poetical and descriptive and emotionally charged. It's quite a gift that the author possesses. I could imagine JA Baker writing about disassembling a toilet and it being just as engaging. *THE PEREGRINE* is a great book, mysterious, sad, and strangely thrilling at times. I'm glad to have read it and would love to read it again one day. I wouldn't know how to recommend it. I confess to know nothing about birds nor do I have any more interest in the genre of "nature writing" than I did when I started it. But this book is that good and must be read to be believed.

Don says

As with *The Peregrine*, the essence of this work (*The Hill of Summer*) is simple: it is one man's observations of the natural world, particularly birds, during the middle six months of the year (albeit spread over ten years), in a small variety of habitats in a small area of Essex. This formula appears to be a recipe for dullness and repetition but the richness of Baker's writing makes this anonymous stretch of countryside come alive in the reader's imagination.

It took me a long time to read *The Hill of Summer*, not because it is 'difficult', tedious or indigestible but because it is so rich in imagery and language. Every sentence merits being savoured, and almost every one brings a surprise - a highly original way of looking at the natural world. Indeed, the writing is so rich, that it is recommended that one reads *The Peregrine* first, as a kind of acclimatisation, before tackling *The Hill of Summer*.

In this edition, Baker's writing is excellently complemented by the introductions of Mark Cocker (to the two main works) and John Fanshawe (to extensive extracts of Baker's diaries), which added much to my understanding and pleasure of reading.

The volume concludes with an essay describing the coastal wilderness of the Dengie peninsula, in east Essex. Written in 1971, it is an eloquent, elegiac, at times angry, regretful view of what would be lost when the then-planned Foulness airport was built. It serves as a more general protest, and a reminder that 'development' can ruin wilderness - or even wildness - through noise, and night-time light, and drifting pollution, even where the land remains physically undisturbed. Baker's writing helps tell us why we need these (relatively) untouched places.

Eleanor says

THE HILL OF SUMMER

I read "*The Peregrine*" a few weeks ago, and gave it five stars. I have now read Baker's other book, "*The Hill of Summer*", where he writes of observations over a six month period, gleaned from many years of returning to the same area and observing the wildlife there. Again, it was a wonderful read, though it was more general than the first book which concentrated on observations of Peregrines, with other birds being almost incidental. Baker's observations are minute, and his writing is beautiful. Here is a sample taken from towards the end of the book, describing the approach of night:

"Flocks of starlings fly west toward their roosting-place; mallard go inland to feed in the stubble. There is an inevitable stillness here, like the calm solitude of still water. A meadow pipit calls as I cross the field. The

green of the grass intensifies, then fades to grey. All shapes recede, then seem to come slowly nearer, as dusk deepens and day ends.

There is a soft breath of parting among the brittle stems of the reeds at the side of the dyke. A short-eared owl floats up into the air. Its wings press slowly down and forward as it billows away across the fields. Gliding and banking steeply, it fades through the dusk. All around me, I hear the calls of golden plover rising like a mist of sound.

...

Deep in the afterglow, the gently imploring calls of partridges breathe upwards, like smoke-curls of autumn dusk. A hare runs into the dark corn. The empty land reaches out beyond the dusk, into the dews of night, into the fields of stars.

The estuary sinks slowly down below the black rampart of the farm, with all its brightness held up to me for the last time in one great flashing rim of light. Then I go inland, into the dark country of the minatory owls."

Taka says

Amazing--

This book contains not only *The Peregrine* but Baker's only other published book, *The Hill of Summer*, plus a chunk of his actual birdwatching diaries and an article he wrote in 1971. Though the writing is ethereally gorgeous throughout, I actually liked his less famous second work, *The Hill of Summer*, which is shorter (at about 100 pages, compared to the 170 of *The Peregrine*) and felt a lot more condensed, like diamond, with more intense sparkles of lyrical beauty. Of course, *The Peregrine* has its moments—passages that dazzle you and leave you breathless—but the obsession over the hawk does get a little tiresome, and I was much more drawn to the strikingly raw ruminations Baker engages in at random, sparse moments throughout the book on birds, nature, and life/death (e.g., "Wild things are truly alive only in the place where they belong," "One comes to love [mud], to be like a wading bird, happy only at the edges of the world where land and water meet, where there is no shade and nowhere for fear to hide," "We have no element. Noting sustains us when we fall"). For me, *The Peregrine* had way too many slack stretches between those moments of lyrical soaring, and I thought about putting the book down—the first 80 pages or so, I think, was tough, but then something happens around the halfway point (around December) and his writing gets taut, edgier (and/or I got used to the rhythm of his writing) and I enjoyed it far more than before. But what's incredible is that he sustains that level of intense meditative and lyrical flight almost entirely throughout *The Hill of Summer* and I was pretty much enthralled and repeatedly floored, relishing every slow page (you don't want to skim over anything—this is a book that demands to be read slowly, very, very slowly) and every burn of poetry it contained, like something dark and too rich to eat at once.

One of the editors of the book in the introduction says that there's no narrative in *The Hill of Summer* and it's a diffuse book (which it is) while there is a kind of narrative in *The Peregrine*, but I beg to differ. Both pretty much lack any sort of narrative, though the latter does have a focus (the peregrine). But the focus does get dull after a while, and hence the former is the stronger work for me because there's variety—you get to know different habitats around Baker's hometown and each encounter with the place puts up spectacular flocks of thoughts all different in their plumage but equally mesmerizing—and, as I mentioned above, it's a lot more compact, which makes it more of a long prose poem than anything else.

One palpable effect of reading this book is that it's changed my perception of the world around me and I

began to notice what little of birds and nature around me, and that's a testament to the sheer power of Baker's language. This was probably the reason why the film director Werner Herzog recommended the book to anyone who wants to make films, but I question his recommendation—this book is clearly not for anyone, really, and definitely not for someone who wants to learn basic film techniques like narrative or character development or what have you. Rather it's for those who want to cultivate a poetic sensibility in viewing the world and conveying that experience.

In short, not a book for anyone and everyone. Highly recommended for anyone who's into poetry and nature.

Nick Swarbrick says

A curious monument to a very particular kind of bird watching. There are beautiful turns of phrase so often that quotation would seem to diminish them, mostly in similes for this or that bird behaviour. Baker focuses on the peregrines of the Essex marshes, admiring them, fearing them, identifying with them; this obsessive reporting over the seasons builds a wonderfully detailed picture of a deadly raptor in a place "beyond desolate:" yes, quoting is irresistible, as is the relentless episode after episode of watching a set of birds at their work.

Brian Robbins says

I've read *Peregrine* 2ce and *The Hill of Summer* is at least as good. It is very much a book for slow and very focused reading. It gives the closest thing in print to the experience of physical exposure to different environments, at different periods of the year, and the living things within them.

The language he uses and the way he uses it gives the immediacy of the best poetry. I love going back to any of the chapters at night or when there isn't a chance for walking, as the best of substitutes for what i can't experience at the time. Baker also gives a great deal of insight into how to enjoy the real experience so much better - if only I had the knowledge and the skills he demonstrates.

Joe Susnick says

A masterful piece of writing that I hated.

Jed Mayer says

I bought this because it was the only in print edition of Baker's follow-up to *The Peregrine*, one of the greatest works of the twentieth century and probably the greatest piece of nature/ecological writing ever. *The Hill of Summer* only just falls short of its predecessor by a slight margin. It is a visionary piece of writing that frequently moved me to tears for its sheer eloquence and insight. I only wish the editors had taken more care with this edition: I spotted at least thirty significant typos in *The Hill of Summer* alone, particularly

frustrating with such a careful and often experimental writer like Baker. Nevertheless, it's great to have these works together, along with the extensive selection of diary entries, published here for the first time. If someone were to reissue *The Hill of Summer* in its original format, without typos, however, I would purchase it without hesitation. Perhaps NYBooks will step up...

I have now read this edition of *The Peregrine* and am shocked to find even more typos in that work than in *Hill of Summer*. Shocking: the publishers should be ashamed of putting out such a poorly edited edition of this major work.

Jennifer says

This was an intense experience. It is unusual with me for reading in short bursts over an extended period to be a good sign. However, I found this was the way to get the full colour from the book without drowning in the rich purpleness.

In a way I enjoyed the diaries the most as they showed the underpinnings of both *The Peregrine* and *The Hill of Summer*. The man could not help but write as he did, even when making journal entries at the end of each day. He communicates the pleasure of identification (naming things is one of our earliest pleasures after all) and the pleasure of the visual and auditory experience of being in nature. He has his favourites... and others. I wonder if he would have viewed starlings more appreciatively now they are threatened - yet one of the most striking passages, about the cruelty in nature, is an elegy for a nestling starling. He wrote in interesting times... buzzard populations were at a nadir and only his obsession provided so many peregrine sightings (I suspect his wife Doreen is the unsung heroine of his works) *The Peregrine* is not 'the natural history of the peregrine' it is about hunting and killing and eating. *The Hill of Summer* was less focused but still beautifully written. Interestingly it is only the final short essay on the Essex Coast which is conventionally gloomy... Baker anticipates, in 1971, a vast airport.

A fabulous work of nature writing.
