



Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr

John Crowley

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“*Ka* is a beautiful, often dreamlike late masterpiece.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“One of our country’s absolutely finest novelists.” —Peter Straub, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Interior Darkness* and *Ghost Story*

From award-winning author John Crowley comes an exquisite fantasy novel about a man who tells the story of a crow named Dar Oakley and his impossible lives and deaths in the land of Ka.

A Crow alone is no Crow.

Dar Oakley—the first Crow in all of history with a name of his own—was born two thousand years ago. When a man learns his language, Dar finally gets the chance to tell his story. He begins his tale as a young man, and how he went down to the human underworld and got hold of the immortality meant for humans, long before Julius Caesar came into the Celtic lands; how he sailed West to America with the Irish monks searching for the Paradise of the Saints; and how he continuously went down into the land of the dead and returned. Through his adventures in Ka, the realm of Crows, and around the world, he found secrets that could change the humans’ entire way of life—and now may be the time to finally reveal them.

Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr Details

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From Reader Review Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr for online ebook

Ryan says

[4.5 stars] Hmm, a guy named John CROW-ley, who's not too far from the end of his natural lifespan, writes a novel about crows and death. Coincidence?

I've appreciated animal-based fantasy novels over the years (e.g. *Watership Down*), and this one sounded like it had some literary qualities. It's probably more in the realm of magic realism than fantasy, though, blurring the lines between the real world and a land of the dead, which is a place that, according to the storyteller, is really meant for the living. For us. As with much magic realism, meanings of the more fanciful events are left to the reader's interpretation, as riddles of sorts, but the writing has a haunting beauty, as well as a playful quality, that I much enjoyed, even if it made me a bit sad.

The story concerns an unusually long-lived crow, who doesn't have a name or much of a language of his own at first, but acquires both over thousands of years of interacting with and observing humans, passing both concepts on to his fellow crows. This crow, eventually named Dar Oakley, is born in pre-antiquity Europe, and comes to know the tribal people living there. He befriends a young girl, who later becomes the tribe's shaman, and enters the world of the dead with her. Crowley plays a little bit coy about the beings and places in this world, showing it through the lens of Dar Oakley's limited understanding, but it seems to match the mythology of the shaman's tribe, who consider crows agents of soul transport. While there, Dar Oakley finds "the most precious thing", a mysterious, unseeable object that confers immortality. He loses it in a forest and instead of passing to the shaman, the immortality goes to him.

So, Dar Oakley passes through the ages, revisiting the land of death repeatedly. He encounters the Romans. He becomes part of the life of a somewhat willful medieval monk, who enters a now more Christianized land of death through the same portal that the shaman once had, now inside a church. In teaching his fellow crows to associate humans with killing (and therefore food), he becomes even more unwittingly bound up with human death. The monk travels to Ireland and from there on Saint Brendan's legendary voyage to within sight of North America. From there, Dar Oakley hops to that continent, and gets to know an indigenous tribe. Its mischievous storyteller, though, is always changing or embellishing Dar Oakley's stories, and soon Dar Oakley isn't sure of the truth himself. He falls in love, or the corvid equivalent, with another ancient crow, one with a few secrets of her own (as we see, certain characters will reappear in new forms). Later, he witnesses the American Civil War, and then faces off against a hateful crow hunter, who plays tricks with the psychology of crows that allow him to murder (as it were) thousands. But Dar Oakley has learned some tricks of his own. In our own near future, ravaged by plague, he meets the narrator, who tells this story, then seeks the land of dead for himself.

For all its somberness, there's a lot of humor in the story, and Crowley has fun with the behavior and quirks of crows, who are often creatures of the moment, without the human capacity for planning and introspection, but nonetheless communicate (sample crow argument: "I'm mad! You make me mad!" "Oh, yeah? Well, I'm crazy mad!"). They also have a bit more groupthink than humans going on. "A crow alone is no crow", after all. It gets them into trouble — "that's not a crow!" calls Dar Oakley to other crows being lured into a trap by a fake cry. "But what if it is? What if it is!", they call back, unable to resist instinct. Maybe it is a fault shared with us.

There are some interwoven themes in this novel: names, origins, belonging to a group, the desire for

company, the power of stories, and — of course — death. There's also some meta-ness, teasingly insinuated through the various not-quite-reliable storytellers. Dar Oakley relates his history to the narrator in a literal-minded crow way, but one realizes that somewhere along his journey, he's learned to tell riddles. The "one most precious thing" isn't quite what we're first led to believe. In the land of death, "there is only one of everything, met again and again".

In sum, this is a lyrical, melancholy, gently funny novel, full of significances both obvious and hidden. It's about a universality of experience, a relationship with life — and its end — shared across time and cultures. We come to our own lands of death seeking the same things as others who have gone before us. Maybe crows, influenced, fed, and killed by us as they are, then absorbed into our mythos, have their part to play there.

If, like me, you're drawn to novels that fall outside traditional genre boundaries (and/or are intrigued by crows), I definitely recommend this one. I also appreciated all the natural imagery in the story, which reminded me, in reading experience, of *The Life of Pi*.

Sarah says

Absolutely gorgeous.

Gary says

John Crowley's writing is so graceful and lyrical and contemplative that his novels often feel like long elegiac poems masquerading as prose fiction. His latest, *Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr* is quite possibly the most John Crowley-esque of John Crowley novels. It is a beautiful work of art – enchanting and reflective, rendered in stark images and hermeneutical musings on the nature of life and mortality. It is also relentlessly and frustratingly cerebral; intellectually and aesthetically satisfying but lacking any identifiable emotional core. It is essentially the history of western civilization as experienced by an immortal crow named Dar Oakley. As climate change wreaks havoc on the natural world, an injured Dar Oakley relates his life's story to an unnamed human narrator, who filters it through his own experience with a recent tragedy. Dar Oakley's biography is captivating, the narrator's relationship to the crow and his tale less so. A thrilling and complex – if somewhat opaque – novel.

Ctgt says

Stories, Coyote said. Not to tell you something you don't already know. We're made of stories now, brother. It's why we never die even if we do.

In the near future, a dying man tells the story of Dar Oakley, a Crow who steals and then loses "the most precious thing in the world" and is doomed to eternal life. The deaths and rebirths of Dar begin in Iron Age and medieval Europe then jumps to North America with Native Americans, the Civil War and ends with a world in gradual decline.

I want to understand about the dead, how it is they are in more than one place at the same time, or in no

place at all, which is perhaps the same thing.

The line between worlds

Life, death

Myth, history

Dream, reality

We seemed to go back the same way we came, but I've learned-just as Dar Oakley learned-that here you can never go back the way you came. That you never do anywhere. You only and always go on.

8/10

Pavle says

„We are still here.“

?udno je što živi toliko razmišljaju o smrti – a mrtvi baš nimalo. Ponekad se ?ini da je to sve što radimo. Bar dok ne umremo. O tome je ovaj roman. O mestu sa druge strane svakog od nas, pa makar ono ni ne postojalo.

I o pri?ama.

Uvek sam pristrasan kada ?itam, ali Krouli mi je posebno drag. Litl, Big je jedan od onih Romana koje pišem sa velikim po?etnim R, a ponekad i velikim V, kao u Velikih. I zato sam i ovaj roman, kao prvi njegov koji ?itam što bi rekli in-ril-tajm, iš?ekivao kao leto u zimu i zimu u leto. Nije mi bilo svejedno – želeo sam da mi se svidi. I znao sam da ho?e. Jer sve je ponovo tu: svet kao glina za igranje, liri?an, nikad naporan jezik, melanolija koja je druga re? za atmosferu, likovi (ovde mahom životinjski) koji u par re?i izgovorenih kažu više o ljudskoj prirodi nego ma koji traktat na temu. Krouli je poseban, nepravedno potcenjen, a o romanu još više govori to što sam apsolutno uveren da je ovaj roman *njemu* poseban. Da možda kao da je sve išlo ka tome da ga napiše.

Elem, ne?u još dugo. Ne valja. Ponešto treba i da se pro?ita.

Dar Oukli je vrana koja je „ukrala“ nešto ljudsko, koja kroz nekih dve hiljade i kusur godina pokušava da shvati što je to smrt, što su to ljudi, šta smo to svi mi. To radi tako što pri?a pri?u – bilo koju pri?u – kako je slušao pri?u. Živeo, živeo, i onda umro. Kako se i sam u nju uverio, tako što je posetio podzemlje, svaki put razli?ito, svaki put na drugi na?in prepri?ano – svaki put podjednako stvarno. I na to se sve svodi. Na stotinu i jednu smrt, i jedan san, izmedju.

5+

Daniel Polansky says

A view of humanity's journey from the stone age to just beyond tomorrow, as told (sort of) by Dar Oakely, a magic, immortal crow. I like John Crowley a lot, even though I haven't liked all his books. He's brilliant and has a fine prose pen and most importantly (particularly in the thimble-sized genre in which he writes) he's ambitious, his writing defying easy convention or simple analysis. *Ka* is a lot easier to get through than say, *Aegypt*, but still this is the sort of book which is going to turn off most genre readers by virtue of his scope and difficulty, while, probably, getting the usual short shrift from the literary types who can't admit to liking speculative fiction unless it's been written in a different language. Which is too bad because, while imperfect, *Ka* is a really strong book. The first 2/3 in particular are strange and original, at turns horrifying and beautiful, and Dar Oakley's peculiar series of journeys through the worlds of men living and men dead are weird and creepy and exciting. It bogged down a fair bit once we reached modernity, both because the various subplots aren't as strong and just generally I think because the idea had kind of run out of steam a hundred pages before we actually ended the book, but still this is a thoughtful, valuable take on the miseries of human existence and the endless unknowability of death. Also, lots of flying. Library, but I'd probably keep it until I have to move somewhere again anyway.

Christopher Owen says

Breathtaking and beautiful, *Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr* is a major achievement in writing from a master of the craft. The novel approaches in significance and power Crowley's earlier masterworks like *Little, Big* and *Engine Summer*, while at once surpassing those novels in grandness of scale. This fine novel should be on everyone's must read list, particularly if you're a fan of beautiful prose and writing that has been honed to perfection throughout. It also should appear on the ever-present 'best of the year' lists for 2017—if it doesn't, that will indeed be a crime.

Contrarius says

I have not seen many (or any?) folks talking about *Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruins of Ymr* by John Crowley. I just finished it yesterday.

It's an interesting blend of post-breakdown-of-society (not exactly apocalypse) with History-of-Western-Civilization-Through-a-Crow's-Eyes with Watership-Crow plus Land-of-the-Dead. There's a framing story of Dar Oakley (a crow) telling the stories of his many lives (he keeps getting reincarnated) to a dying man, and then what happens after all the tales are told.

This was the first Crowley I've ever read (listened to), and I enjoyed it. It is perhaps about grief and how death is different for every culture -- sort of the "reality is all subjective" idea -- but I'm sure there are many depths I didn't even notice. ;-)

The audio version is read by Crowley himself. Fortunately, he's an appealing reader -- the sort who makes you want to hear more -- so, good for him!

eta -- Ooo, I think Ctgt's review caught the idea better than I did. The book is largely about lines -- lines between life/death, myth/history, dream/reality, lines between realms, lines between people.

alex says

a tremendous novel that seems doomed to be woefully underread. the transportive, evocative prose we've come to expect from crowley, superlative worldbuilding, an astute meditation on the power and role of storytelling, and a charming, at times heartbreaking, study of the morphing role of crows in myths and tall tales. one of my favorites of the year and probably my third favorite (after little, big and engine summer) from a wonderful writer

Adam says

Every one of John Crowley's books seems to contain an ineffable insight, something no one else could express without seeming daft or flat-footed, but which he forms into exquisitely revelatory and evocative turns of phrase. *Ka* is a bit different, because its thematic concern is fairly obvious and universal. It isn't different insofar as Crowley's touch is as light and eloquent as ever.

But while death is undeniably the theme of the book, and even though it's certainly more thematically driven than any of Crowley's previous works, that isn't the thing I found so special and impressive about it. What's cool about it is that it uses a simple premise to explore this sprawling history of crow-human interactions, cultural evolution, and niche construction, from a *Watership Down*-style Crow culture voice that feels genuinely Crowlike. I'm still in awe of all that Crowley manages to do here and how well it works. It has a narrative framing device, and jumps through several distinct historical periods to take different angles on its central questions, showing meaningful change in both human and crow societies. What's more, it somehow manages to do so in a middle-ground shamanic space both species can traverse, but with dramatically different perspectives over time. That is, it's a multi-species postmodern folklore epic that explores a timeless and universal theme through the lens of eco-cultural coevolution. It's amazing. I still can't get over the fact that it exists, and that it works. Maybe only Crowley could pull it off, but it does give me more hope for trying some of these elements in my own work.

As a novel, it maybe isn't my favorite of Crowley's; the framing narrative section is kind of weak, there aren't particularly strong characters, and the flavor isn't as strong as his other books. But it's still a Crowley book, so you're always in for something special, and *Ka* definitely is that.

Spencer Ellsworth says

This was a really poetic and interesting book, a ton like *Watership Down*, although its structure (Dar Oakley lives many lives, stretching across history, doing things that are sometimes magical and sometimes just interesting) sometimes made it too easy to put down.

It's definitely not an edge-of-your-seat book, but it's the kind of book that really makes you think about humanity, and feel as though this animal character has a lot to teach you about your own humanity. And I did finish it all without having to renew it at the library even once, which is a major victory for me, as I get distracted from books easily.

Kevin says

Best book of 2017!

Mark says

Not a novel, but an opera. The story is just silly, but I went for the music.

Chris Chester says

Ka is a story about a crow. But equally, it is a story of death.

Dar Oakley, or Dar of the Oak by the Lea, is our main avian character. He seems at first a humble crow. Through Dar Oakley the (presumably human) reader comes to know and regard the humble crow and his social relationships and hierarchies, his mating behaviors and general perspective on life.

The universe changes, however, when Dar Oakley comes into contact with Fox Cap, the harbinger of a nascent humanity into the world of the crow. But equally, Fox Cap brings Dar Oakley into the world of humanity, assigning the humble crow the mantle of "death bird" for their proclivity for dead human flesh.

Dar Oakley himself becomes deathless, still seemingly a crow in his own right, but equally an immortal symbol for humanity as it grows and changes over the years.

It's never sketched out in minute detail, but appears to progress from a pre-Norman Celtic past to some kind of age of chivalry to the early days of settlement in the New World to the Civil War and ultimately beyond our current reckoning.

Dar Oakley is the one constant and he consistently finds himself shepherding humans beyond the pale into the lands of death -- or Ymr. Ymr itself changes its shape over time, seeming to conform to those whose attention and regard it's attracted, all the way to the novel's conclusion.

John Crowley's talent for crafting a plausible magical reality underpinning the real one is very much on display here. As with his other work like Little Big, it's really his restraint -- his ability to lead the reader's mind paint in the spaces between his sentences -- that allows the novel to soar.

I sometimes wondered, even as I read Ka, whether my affection for his fiction isn't just a veiled form of narcissism, where what I'm celebrating is more my imagination than Crowley's prose. Certainly it feels that way when I read reviews from people who had trouble following the thread of the narrative. Surely I am just better at painting in the mental gaps?

But I don't think that's it. To be sure, Crowley's style is not well engineered for a popular audience. The fact that his work isn't more widely known despite persistent output and sterling quality seems to speak to that.

I think it's just something about his style that aligns with a certain kind of reader. In a sense, he's a lot like Dar Oakley, the seemingly mystical figure that is able to guide me beyond the portal into Ymr. I'm glad I don't have to stay, but so too am I glad I have someone to lead me there.

William says

Intellectually, I know that the world is unfair. Somehow, though, that knowledge doesn't make it easier to accept the fact that John Crowley remains a relatively unknown and uncelebrated author. His writing never fails to sustain me, engage me, move me (not the easiest task, frankly), and, most of all, please me. *Little, Big* is my favorite book--no qualifications. It brings me more joy than anything else I've ever read. Now I'll have to figure out where *Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr* fits in my reading life, though I already know that it will loom large.

Ka is both like and unlike all of Crowley's previous novels. The prose is beautiful and assured, and I felt from the first chapter that I was walking in a Crowley universe. But the scale is much larger than anything he's written before--larger even than the four-book *Aegypt* sequence, which attempted to rewrite Western intellectual history. *Ka* tells the story of a crow who lives for a very long time--starting from the Iron Age (or perhaps even earlier) and moving through the near future. As such, the book offers a bird's-eye view of human civilization. But though the scale is epic, the focus is always personal. I think that's because Crowley isn't really interested in discussing the spread of human civilization. Instead, the book is really about two things that bind not only cultures but also individuals: Death and Story. The novel presents Story as both our primary weapon against the inevitability of Death and also as an interlocutor which allows us to accept Death on its terms. But don't be confused: the book is **not** somber at all. It's adventurous, hallucinatory, and very funny at times. And most of all, it's beautiful. Like all of Crowley's works.

Maybe I'm old fashioned for being satisfied by beauty, even for desiring it in the first place. Maybe that's why I'm one of the first to review this novel, even though it's been out for a few weeks already. Based on the lack of attention the book has received, it doesn't look like *Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr* will be the book to change Crowley's career and standing. But that lack of attention is the fault of the world, an essentially unfair place, and not the fault of this masterful novel.
