

Reading Guide for *Song of the Crow* by Layne Maheu

About *Song of the Crow*

Song of the Crow is a retelling of the story of the Great Flood from the point of view of I Am, a crow. It is also a crow *_bildungsroman_*. With the sweep and feel of an epic, this novel was inspired by a combination of factors: the author's interest in crows, which was deepened by a series of profiles he and journalist Ben Jacklet wrote – “Bird People: watching the Bird Watcher”; his discovery of Robert Graves' and Patai Raphael's *Hebrew Myths, the Book of Genesis*, in which the Raven figures prominently as a trickster figure; and finally, by the example of Barbara Gowdy's novel about elephants, **The White Bone**, which she based on her actual observations of elephant behavior.

I Am is the last fledgling in the line of The Mother of Many and his father, Fly Home. In one of many parallels Maheu creates between crow life and humanity in the novel's mythic universe, a white feather under one of I Am's eyes marks him as special, to his father's dismay. Accordingly, he is called by the Good God Crow to follow, observe and learn from Noah – also burdened with the misfortune of “specialness” – as he and his family finish the Ark, load it with all the world's living creatures, and endure the prophesied flood.

I Am sneaks on board the Ark, portrayed by Maheu as a giant crow's nest, and unobserved, has free run of all its labyrinthine passages and chambers until it beaches on the side of Mount Ararat. His freedom ends in capture after a fight with Raven, and he is the bird Noah sends out three times to find signs of life beyond the mountain they now occupy as the New Paradise. The third time, he is nearly killed in the effort. Rescued by Noah's dog, I Am is nursed back to health by Noah's son Ham and his wife Nanniah.

Noah in the meantime succumbs to the burden of the trust placed in him for the welfare of the animals he has rescued from extinction and is descending into drink, duped by a visit from Satan into making a violent and unnecessary animal sacrifice. When he curses and exiles Ham and Nanniah, allowing them to leave with her giant son from her first marriage who has survived being tied to the outside of the Ark through the flood (Maheu says he represents the baggage from the Old World), I Am leads them to find their personal New Eden. Parallel to their exile, he makes a nest in an isolated place with his foster sister Plum Black, who was on the Ark as the only other crow chosen by the “Angel of her own kind” to make the journey.

In the resolution of the novel, A mysterious crow, Strange Bird of the Withered Coat, appears one day to tell I Am that Raven has tried to take credit for having found land, and that revisionist history has named the dove as the one who brought back proof of land, in the form of a twig. At the end of their visit, Strange Bird renames I Am, explaining to him that he alone has understood the necessity of learning from man for the sake of all living creatures' survival, and carries within him all of crow history: “The songscape is in you, like no other. When I hear you, I'm there in the old aerie, with your Mother of Many above you in the nest, and all your siblings in the trees. Even crows you never met, they come back to me. I'll call you Memory of Many, if I may.” As Strange Crow

flies away, surely to the Tree of the Dead, he calls out “At the Winter Roost, sing of us then.” Leaving a solitary I Am, now Memory of Many, to tend to his new brood and dream of the Winter Roost, finding “refuge with the spirits in the wind,” in which he can hear the voices of his past life. And to one last soul-restoring encounter with trickster Raven and God Crow.

About the Author

Layne Maheu is 44 years old. He lives in Seattle with his seven year old son and makes his living as a carpenter. After taking a degree in literature from the University of California – Santa Barbara, he traveled to Alaska to work on fishing boats. Later, during the winters in Seattle he learned carpentry. He was born in Burlington, Vermont, and grew up on both coasts, in Massachusetts and California. His intense interest in crows grew out of an experience he had on the coast of Oregon on his honeymoon. He was already a bird watcher, but came upon a man who had been watching the same aerie of falcons for 13 years. Fascinated and deeply impressed by the wealth of knowledge this man had accrued by concentrating on one species of bird, he decided to do the same, eventually settling on the crow family.

Questions

1. Do you remember the creation stories of your religious or cultural upbringing, or from school? What are they and how do they compare to Maheu’s version of things in *Song of the Crow*?
2. What other books and stories have you read or movies have you seen that use animals as characters? To what extent do they seem like they are anthropomorphized (given human characteristics, behavior, and language)? What examples have you read wherein different animals seem to be chosen to represent certain types of people, or human behavior, such as the pigs in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*?
3. Have you read or seen books, stories, or movies that are more like what Maheu was trying to do with crows? How successful do you think he was in trying to be as pure as possible to what crows would do in nature? How good a job did he do, in your opinion, in imagining what crows might be thinking when they are doing something, as crows? How appropriate did you think his use of crows was in telling this particular story? What descriptive and narrative devices did he use to develop characters for the crows to distinguish them one from the other?
4. A bildungsroman is defined as “a novel which traces the spiritual, moral, psychological, or social development and growth of the main character from (usually) childhood to maturity.” How well does this novel fit this definition, with respect to I Am? Does Maheu succeed in giving the crow all these dimensions of character? What events or passages from the novel dramatize these qualities? The very name “I Am” connotes self consciousness. In what way is I Am conscious of himself? Is he different from the other crows in this respect?

5. What role does fear play in what happens to each of the characters – bird and human – in this novel?
6. Examine each of the human characters in this novel, as you are able to from the story as told. How would you analyze each of them in terms of their respective roles within the family dynamic, their personalities, and views of the world as they know it? How would you describe their interpersonal relationships? What is apparently going on in the human world as Noah is building his ark? What rule or rules do Ham and Nanniah violate on board the Ark. Why does Noah exile them afterwards?
7. What kind of sense of time does this novel use? How old is Noah? How long did it take him to build the ark? How many years pass in the novel itself? How if at all can you calculate it? If you had a Judeo-Christian or comparable upbringing, did that help you understand this element of the story? If you did not, did you have difficulty following any or all of the events of the novel and its portrayal of the passage of time and human life span?
8. Discuss the “fantastic” elements of the novel. How many can you identify? If you are a fan of that type of writing, what other novels, if any, does it remind you of? What makes it different from your favorites? If you are not a particular fan of that type of writing, did this novel appeal to you anyway? If so, why?
9. Think about the ending of the novel. What emotions does it evoke in you? How does it make you feel? What do you make of what happens between God Crow, Raven, and I Am? When I Am tells us we should listen to him, because he might be talking to us, what do you think he might be saying and why should we pay attention?
10. Maheu says that he took a traditional myth and developed his own themes around it. What do you think some of those themes are, and what evidence do you find for them in the events of the novel or the way Maheu chooses to tell his story? What do you think the larger point or points of the novel is/are?

Recommended Reading

- “Fool’s Crow,” James Welch
 “Watership Down,” Richard Adams
 “Crow and Weasel,” Barry Lopez
 “Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven,” Barry Lopez
 “The White Bone,” Barbara Gowdy
 “Waterland,” Graham Swift
 “Ravens in Winter,” Bernd Heinrich
 “The American Crow and the Common Raven,” Lawrence Kilham
 “Bird Brains: The Intelligence of Crows, Ravens, Magpies and Jays,” Candace Savage
 “Hebrew Myths, the Book of Genesis,” comp. Robert Graves and Patai Raphael
 “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking,” Walt Whitman
 “Refusal to Mourn the Death of a Child by Fire, in London,” Dylan Thomas

Interview

UB: After deciding that you wanted to concentrate on watching one kind of bird, what brought you to crows?

LM: The fact that the crows were the fantastic bird to study, especially when I found out that the best books on bird behavior were about the corvids – the raven, crow, magpie and jay -- because they're the smartest birds. And they're marvelous, in the sense that if you knock their forest down and put up a McDonald's, the crow flies down on a telephone pole and goes "Okay, how does this benefit me?" They figure it out really quickly.

UB: How did *Song of the Crow* grow out of the Bird People project [a series of profiles on "watching the bird watcher"]?

LM: We did some visuals of a nearby Winter Roost to go with the public readings we were doing, which really impressed me – I mean there are so many thousands of them and their chorus is so loud that they drown out the sounds of a freeway running right by there. I actually saw a group of crows run an eagle out of its own nest! At the same time, a friend who was doing research on my behalf found the Robert Graves and Patai Rafael compilation of Hebrew Myths (*Hebrew Myths the Book of Genesis*). In there, the raven figures as a fantastic and somewhat modern and odd character. He is discovered making love on the ark, he's punished but he never quite acquiesces to Noah's will. He's always the entrepreneur, always on the side making criticisms. He accuses Noah of lusting after his own mate and I thought, "Wow, that is strange, thought provoking, and fresh." It's a very sort of contemporary and understandable reaction from this strange bird. And that makes the raven just that much more interesting. Then I read about *The White Bone*, where Barbara Gowdy bases her book on real elephant behavior instead of anthropomorphizing her animal characters, and right away I knew I was going to write this book. I had the raven, I had a good story, I had an interest in the subject matter, and within a minute of reading about this book, I said, "Okay. I know what my book's going to be."

UB: How is the book indebted to *Hebrew Myths the Book of Genesis*? Thematically? Structurally?

LM: I would say it is more structurally indebted. I think that is a really good distinction to bring out. I apply my own themes and my own take on the material, but many of the things that happen you will find in that compilation, like how he gets the animals onto the Ark. But I had to get away from the original myth there, because it was too fantastical! Each of them is led there by "an Angel of its own kind," bearing a bucket of fodder, and my agent said that was just too "cute" for contemporary readers to swallow. But the part of the story that deals with Noah, many of the big events, follow closely the structure of that myth.

UB: How would you describe the novel? It's been described as a meditation, allegory, a fantasy, it's even a love story. . .

LM: I think it's a retelling of a myth. Myth sometimes can be seen as a diminishing thing, but myth is realer than many stories, in that it grows out the long wellspring of human experience, and it's how we come to understand why we are here. *Song. . .* is a story that grows out of a long continuum of crow knowledge and lore from all over the world, and what people have thought about crows through the ages, and the natural history of the firmament, of what actually happened in nature.

UB: To me it seems to be a metaphor for cosmic or creative process, that everything lives in everything else, that nothing ever really dies.

LM: Oh yes.

UB: In much of mythology, as in the *_bildungsroman_*, the hero is the one who has to descend into a kind of underworld, as does I Am in his third attempt to find dry land for Noah, and comes back in a kind of rebirth, bearing the torch of higher knowledge or understanding, which often includes that understanding of creative process, the gift of Creativity, of Art. In *Song. . .* it is the outsiders, the observers, like I Am, Ham and Nannah, to whom this happens. Were you conscious of that in the composition of the novel?

LM: Oh yes, it is the beings who move somehow out of the loop that can most understand it. And to that I would add the Raven, the trickster. Without participating in the labor of anything, he still manages to profit from it, and is capable of great manipulation of the process. He will trick the farmer into sowing his seed, for instance, and then steal the fruit. And that story at the end of the novel, where Raven taunts I Am about his singing abilities, gulling him into dropping his guard to show Raven that he can too sing, so he can steal the crab from I Am's beak, is a perfect example of what I am talking about. It is also right out of lore native to the Pacific Northwest.

UB: Were you, as a carpenter, drawn to the figure of Noah?

LM: I liked it a lot that Noah is a builder. I mean, what did he have to work with in those days? According to some texts, Noah invented tools. He is the new Adam, and essentially we are all descendants of Noah. He understood history, and in some stories he was depicted as a naturalist.

UB: And the parallel between the structure of the Ark and the Crow's aerie?

LM: Oh yes, that was very deliberate.

UB: How did you actually write this novel and how long did it take?

LM: The first part was all research. I had all these notes on little pieces of paper, all taped together, little bits of bird behavior. And that was the problem with the first part of the novel, giving it a plot. It's kind of a *_bildungsroman_* for crows, and my agent kept telling me we needed a journey there, a test for I Am to prove himself. Instead, I went

with a foreshadowing, with the white feather on I Am's face to create dramatic tension. Then there were years of revision trying to create a plot, and characters, because all crows look pretty much the same, and behave pretty much the same, forcing me to take massive liberties with my original goal that nothing the crows did in the book was different from what they would do in the wild, that I really wanted to stick to the real crow, to real crow behavior. But I had to create characters, a sense of plot and tension, a narrative arc. I complained to John Marzluff [one of his mentors on crow studies] that one of my problems was that my bird characters don't do anything but fly around, peck at the ground, and look for food. And he said, "Well, they're crows!" So that was the first part. The next part was following closely the structure of Graves and Rafael, and although it became richer and richer through the rewrites, it never needed to be structurally blown up and recombined again like the first part. The movement of that narrative, the arc, definitely had a sense of plot.

How long did it take? Seven years.

UB: It has been noted that *Song. . .* deals with the role of fear in survival for all species, including humans, but what about the role of free will?

LM: Free will comes in more with the human characters in the novel, except for Raven, of course. And Noah mostly is an unwilling participant, he complains as he does all the things that God asks of him. Ham and Nanniah don't necessarily buy into the whole thing; they are defiant against their father and God, even. They act more out of free will.

UB: It's ironic that Noah, who is put in charge of the survival of all these species of animals, is guilty of what some people think of as the "sin" of the Enlightenment, which is to forget the concept of *_thanitos_*, that being the lord of creation also means being the servant, that with dominion over the beasts of the earth and all other life comes responsibility. To think that the only things that matter are what matters for humans, and the trouble that can get you into. In not seeing the earth and universe as an organic, ongoing, always being born and reborn process. Noah doesn't even see these creatures.

LM: No, Noah doesn't see that. But Ham and Nanniah do sense that. And I Am learns from them, and they from him. Noah rules over them but does not undergo partnership with them. Ham and Nanniah do. They are our future. We cannot treat the world as our resource, we have to learn to live within it, not over it.

--Interview conducted by Kay Callison