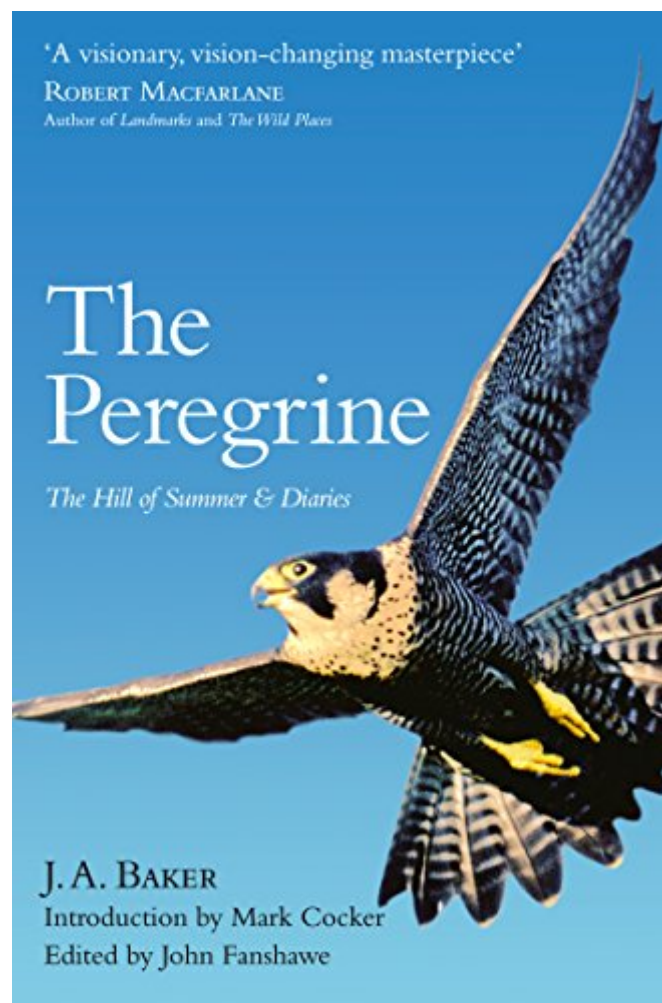




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The Peregrine: The Hill Of Summer & Diaries: The Complete Works Of J. A. Baker



Synopsis

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. Papers, maps, and letters have recently come to light which in turn provide a little more background into J A Baker's history. Contemporaries – particularly from his time at school in Chelmsford – have provided insights, remembering a school friend who clearly made an impact on his generation. 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 agreement of the RSPB, it has been included in this updated new paperback edition of Baker's astounding work.

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Customer Reviews

"The Peregrine" is the most incredible thing I've read in a long time, maybe ever. Both for the writing, and for the experiences that the writing conveys. It begins with two brief chapters, the first about watching, and the second about the form and habits of Peregrine Falcons. These are followed by Baker's diary entries as he follows a pair over the countryside near his home in Essex, England during a winter in the 1960's. He observed them very closely, with enormous patience and effort. He wanted to join with them, to become one if he could, as though one of Ovid's metamorphoses could be brought about by sheer willpower. He got at least halfway there. This is not a normal book. It is a voice from another world. A more or less random sample: "He climbed vertically upward, like a salmon leaping in the great waves of air that broke against the cliff of South Wood. He dived to the trough of a wave, then rose steeply within it, flinging himself high in the air, on stretched wings exultant. At five hundred feet he hung still, tail closed, wings curving far back with their tips almost touching the tip of his tail. He was stooping horizontally forward at the speed of the oncoming wind. He rocked and swayed and shuddered, close-hauled in a roaring sea of air, his furled wings whipping and plying like wet canvas. Suddenly he plunged to the north, curved over to the vertical stoop, flourished his wings high, shrank small and fell. He fell so fast, he fired so furiously from the sky to the dark wood below that his black shape dimmed to grey air, hidden in a shining cloud of speed. He drew the sky about him as he fell. It was final. It was death. There was nothing more. There could be nothing more. Dusk came early. Through the almost dark, the fearful pigeons flew quietly down to roost above the feathered bloodstain in the woodland ride."

One of my granddaughters developed an extraordinary fascination for peregrine falcons. To accommodate, I bought a variety of peregrine-themed items (plush toy, video, maps...) and among them, this book. Every thing was delivered promptly....this book from England; but when I arrived and asked after the collection of items sent, I was met with stern criticism about the book. I had read a bit on line, and had expected the opposite. I sat down with the book and was immediately enchanted. Choosing another entry point at random, I again found myself engaged and wondrous. A third roll of the dice produced the same result. I sat my granddaughter down and began to read

and to explain why what I read/heard was so marvelous. She cocked her head, spun on her heel, and was gone. "Can we play monster?" echoed from the next room. I'm counting the days until she's six. None of you should wait, unless you're five.

This is nature, hard core. The line between Baker and his prey disappears during the year he spends with these birds. Magnificent, heart-stopping, sense-exploding writing. I read it slowly because it made me more observant of everything I miss when I rush. Makes you a better creature on the earth for reading it.

No other way to put it: This book is a treasure of the English language. In *The Peregrine* J.A. Baker describes how he tracked and trekked over months and miles in his native England to watch and record in language like you've never read how peregrines hunt and feed and fly and play and rest. The language he uses to construct his sentences is like none other I have ever read. It's a vivid mix of nature writing and the best poetry. The text is so dense, the sentences are so packed with words bringing life to action--there really is no reading experience I can compare this to. I could only stand to read a few pages at a time; "relish" not "read" would be the better word there. This is more than "nature writing," too. Baker gets under the very surface of life to expose what lurks. Just a few excerpts to illustrate: "The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there." "Terror seeks out the odd, and the sick, and the lost." "There is no mysterious essence we can call a 'place'. Place is change. It is motion killed by the mind, and preserved in the amber of memory." "Whatever is destroyed, the act of destruction does not vary much. Beauty is vapour from the pit of death." I cannot give *The Peregrine* anything less than 5 stars. It's more than a book, it is a reading experience. Reading it will expand your senses. It will enliven you and enrich you as a human being. I think that's the greatest thing we can expect from any book.

Although bird-watching seems at first sight a boring pursuit, the author's narrative of his tracking of peregrines over one winter is riveting. One finds oneself getting sucked into his obsession. He does not pull any punches when describing the brutality of a predatory lifestyle, but he does so so empathetically that one finds oneself increasingly seeing things from the birds' point of view. This leads to a strange but compelling mixture of the brutal and the romantic. His descriptions of the Essex countryside are also beautifully worded. Like with the birds, he describes the countryside in a style that is straightforward, i.e. not flowery, yet full of drily apt metaphors that convey the understated beauty of the countryside.

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