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Ornithologies of Desire Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay

Travis V. Mason

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Psssst. Literary critic Travis Mason has been outside watching birds and inside reading field guides, scientific articles, and biology textbooks. He approaches his subject of “avian poetics” with a solid background in natural history and is therefore able to forge a scientifically grounded ecocriticism. *Ornithologies of Desire* is an important new ecocritical study of birds, poetry, and Canadian literature. Most valuable of all, this book places contemporary Canadian poet Don McKay among the great North American nature writers. Mason’s book will make you want to read McKay—and then go outside and watch birds.

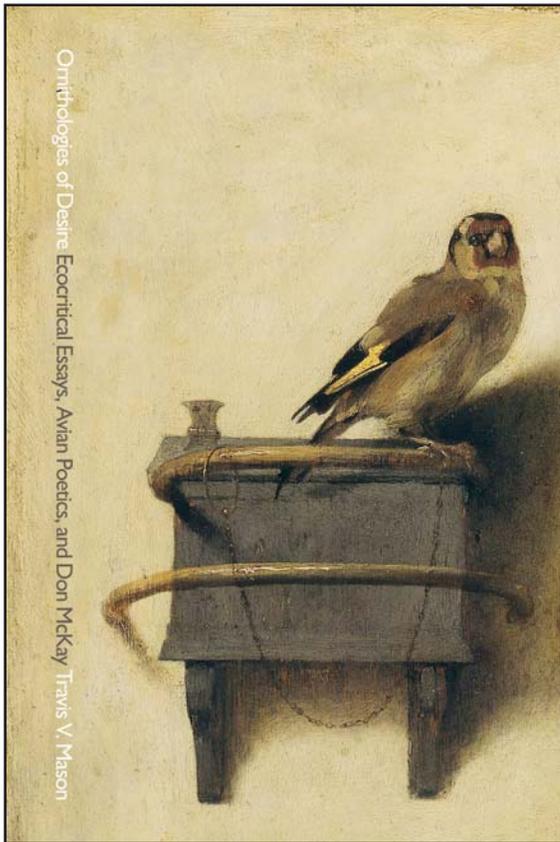
– Cheryll Glotfelty, English Department, University of Nevada, Reno

Ornithologies of Desire develops ecocritical reading strategies that engage scientific texts, field guides, and observation. Focusing on poetry about birds and birdwatching, this book argues that attending to specific details about the physical world when reading environmentally conscious poetry invites a critical humility in the face of environmental crises and evolutionary history.

The poetry and poetics of Don McKay provide the primary subject matter, which is predicated on attention to ornithological knowledge and avian metaphors. This focus on birds enables a consideration of more broadly ecological relations and concerns, since an awareness of birds in their habitats insists on awareness of plants, insects, mammals, rocks, and all else that constitutes place.

Reading McKay’s work alongside ecology and ornithology, through flight and birdsong, both challenges assumptions regarding humans’ place in the earth system and celebrates the sheer virtuosity of lyric poetry rich with associative as well as scientific detail. The resulting chapters, interchapters, and concordance of birds that appear in McKay’s poetry encourage amateurs and specialists, birdwatchers and poetry readers, to reconsider birds in English literature on the page and in the field.

Travis V. Mason teaches English and Canadian studies at Dalhousie and Mount St. Vincent Universities. He studied ecopoetry in South Africa as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow before moving to Halifax to study Canadian literary responses to science with a Killam Postdoctoral Fellowship. His articles have appeared in books and journals, including *Canadian Literature*, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Kunapipi*, and *Mosaic*.



Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay Travis V. Mason

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