



YOUR BOOK CLUB RESOURCE

READING GROUP GUIDE

THE BOOK OF SECOND CHANCES



Birds and Their Meanings

Emily always struck me as someone who looked for the hidden meanings in life. It made me want to give her a fascination, an obsession, that she would use to distract her from the pain and grief she had to endure.

In turn, it led me to research the superstitions and symbolism behind birds, with a view to include some of them in the book as an extra insight into Emily and her journey. There were countless to choose from, and what I have listed below is just a fraction of what exists for each bird, but they are the ones that resonated with me, and with Emily's story, the most.

1. **Cockatoo**—show your best colors, but also a symbol of change, of embarking on an important learning process which requires strength, determination, and courage.
2. **Robin**—beginning of a new idea, symbolizing renewal and new birth. Can also be the symbol of wisdom and patience, of learning something that could take time to come to terms with.
3. **Magpie**—listen to what is being communicated by the world around you and be more vocal about your own thoughts and emotions. Can also symbolize unpredictable behavior or situations.
4. **Peacock**—in Hinduism, the peacock is associated with Lakshmi, who represents patience, kindness, and luck. The feathers are seen as talismans to protect from accidents and misfortune, while also serving as a reminder to show one's true colors.

5. **Pelican**—overcoming loss by looking into ourselves for understanding. Also symbolizes a need to let go of judgment and speak one’s mind with confidence.
6. **Sparrow**—companionship, specifically teamwork, but also self-worth and the understanding that even the smallest of things can make us happy.
7. **Pigeon**—resilience and physical strength, but also a devotion to a goal involving loved ones.
8. **Canary**—freedom from old wounds of the past, a feeling of inspiration, hope, and a new cycle that is about to begin.
9. **Seagull**—messengers of changing times, but also encouraging you to step outside your comfort zone, to be fearless in your search for freedom.
10. **Parakeet**—trust and loyalty, but also the use of improved communication in order to accomplish a specific goal.
11. **Owl**—in Greek mythology, the owl was a symbol for Athena, the goddess of wisdom and strategy. They are also considered to be symbols of mystery, magic, and the ability to see beyond perceived deceit.
12. **Bluebird**—in Russian fairy tales, the blue bird is a symbol of hope. They are also seen as symbols of a spiritual awakening, of a need to give yourself up to the world around you in order to achieve happiness.

13. **Cockerel**—Celtic and Norse lore believe the cockerel to be a messenger of the Underworld, calling out warnings of danger. They also symbolize an awakening of ideas, of illumination, and the need to accept the truth.
14. **Flamingo**—strong, hidden emotions and a reminder not to jump to conclusions. Also represents loyalty and a need to belong to a tribe.
15. **Goose**—desire to escape one’s problems, but also a fierce protectiveness of those you love. Can represent a need to remember the people who got you to where you are today.
16. **Starling**—a message that blessings are on their way, but also a reminder that communication is vital for any kind of relationship to blossom and thrive.
17. **Hummingbird**—optimism, a need to move away from negative thoughts, but also the idea of being present in the moment, of seeking independence and embracing the resilience needed in order to travel along life’s path.
18. **Raven**—in Greek mythology, ravens are associated with Apollo, the god of prophecy. Often seen as a symbol of impending bad luck, they can also symbolize a warning to listen carefully to the messages you are about to receive.
19. **Heron**—in many Chinese legends, a heron’s job was to take departed souls to heaven. They also symbolize self-reliance, independence, and fidelity.

20. **Nightingale**—eating a nightingale’s heart was once thought to inspire creativity, and Shakespeare compared his love poetry to the bird’s song. They also represent healing and love.
21. **Phoenix**—in Greek mythology, a phoenix obtains new life by rising from the ashes of its predecessor. Most commonly seen to represent spiritual rebirth and transformation.
22. **Duck**—aggressive when confronted by an unknown force, but if left alone is sensitive and peaceful. Also symbolizes curiosity for the world around you and freedom to explore.

READER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are a number of places in the book where a character defies expectations. And a recurring theme is not to judge a book by its cover. What were your expectations coming into the book? And how did they change as you read? Did any of the characters surprise you?
2. Following your dreams is an important theme in this book. What might Emily's life have looked like if her grandmother had chosen a different path? Or if Emily had chosen a different path? What times have you faced a fork in the road, and which way did you take?
3. It can be difficult to imagine our parents or grandparents as people in their own right—and what their lives were like before we came along. What do you know about the stories of your family? What might you learn if they put you on a treasure hunt similar to Emily's?
4. Discuss the ways in which Catriona's relationship with Emily is affected by her past and how Catriona's decisions before Emily was even born might have affected the way she chose to hide Emily from the world.
5. Emily chooses to be mute long after her speech returns. Why do you think this is?
6. Why do you think Catriona decided to hide the truth about the original story, both from Emily and the world? Do you think this had something to do with why she dedicated all the original books to her and not someone else?
7. Noah had a profound impact on Catriona and how she chose to live her life. Why do you think she continued to turn him down, choosing instead to raise Emily's mother alone?
8. What do you think will happen to these characters? Will Tyler make it big in Nashville? Will he and Emily reconnect? What do you imagine comes next for Emily?

AUTHOR QUESTIONS

1. *What was your favorite book as a child, and what did you love about it?*

Matilda, by Road Dahl. It was the first book that truly made me understand the power of stories and how they can transport you into new worlds, ones that you picture inside your head. I also loved the idea of a little girl discovering she had the ability to change her future, going against the odds even if others thought she was a bit strange.

2. *For Emily, bookshops and art stores are magical places. What kinds of places feel magical to you?*

Definitely bookshops and libraries. When I was little I was allowed to walk down the road to my local library and would spend most Saturday afternoons curled up in the corner or carrying a stack of books back home. My mother also told me how when I was really tiny I had a meltdown when I refused to leave the children's section and she had to literally drag me by the feet across the floor so she could choose a book for herself!

Now it's pretty much impossible for me to go into a bookshop and not buy something, either for myself or the kids. Both of my children are bookworms and we all have piles of books under our beds. I'm still working on my husband, as he's more of a non-fiction fan, but thankfully he has at least read my book!

3. *What inspired you to tell this story?*

I always read the dedications and acknowledgments in books before I begin the actual story. I find it fascinating to think of who and what was behind the story, how it came about and what inspired the author to put pen to paper. This then turned into a question about what if a dedication was actually something more? A clue that led to a treasure trail of sorts, and subsequently what that clue might be.

I wanted to tell a story within a story, hidden messages and memories that weren't always obvious but when pieced together they made up an entire lifetime. Emily came to me fully formed, right down to her favorite magpie, Milton—I could picture her so clearly, sitting by the back door with her sketchbook open and a warm summer's breeze lifting the pages as she drew.

4. *What parts of Emily do you most identify with?*

The fear of not being good enough. Emily is a talented artist, but everyone thinks she hides away from the world because of her injuries. In fact, it's more to do with shyness and insecurity, of showing her work (and herself) to people and worrying that she would disappoint them.

I've always been quite shy, a bit of a bookworm, and awkward in social situations. At school, my friends were the ones unafraid to talk to anyone (especially boys), while I would hide in the corner or leave the party early and end up at home reading until the early hours of the morning.

5. ***You took a big leap yourself when you left the world of investment banking to become a mom and author. How did some of that experience drive Emily's story? What factors were you considering when you made that big decision?***

I left investment banking first and foremost to become a full-time mom. My husband also works in the industry and we knew having two parents in such demanding jobs would have a negative impact on our kids. I never loved being a banker. It was a role I sort of fell into after university, so I was happy enough to take a step away.

It was only when my youngest started school that I realized I had the time and mental capacity to do something more. Returning to my old job wasn't something I either wanted or could realistically do, and so I decided to turn my attention back to writing.

I wrote my first book when I was twelve, but my mother (who was a teacher), told me to pursue something more academic, which I think meant a job that could pay the bills! But I kept writing all through my teenage years, then at university and even when pregnant with my eldest. I have my grandmother to thank for telling me to take a leap of faith and submitting my work to agents. She was a formidable woman who survived both the Second World War and being a single parent in a time when it was socially unacceptable, especially as a Catholic. She was brilliant and kind and taught me that girls can do anything. While Catriona is a purely fictional character, all of her drive and tenacity definitely come from Nan.

6. ***Why did you choose birds as symbols in this book? Is there a particular one that resonates most with you?***

I've been fascinated by birds, ever since I was lucky enough to go to Africa on safari for my honeymoon. I loved the vibrancy of their feathers— brilliant rainbow hues that stood out against the bright sky. Also the idea of being able to take to the wing at any given moment, to simply up and disappear to somewhere new, is strangely appealing.

There wasn't a conscious decision to put the birds into the book, it seemed to evolve as I wrote the story and I realized that Emily was the sort of person to become a little obsessive about things. I didn't want her to be OCD as well as a recluse, more I felt she needed an escape of sorts. Birds seemed to be the natural fit, and once I started researching their symbolism I realized that they could be used as a way to enhance Emily's view of the world.

I've done several falconry courses and my favorite bird has to be a Peregrine Falcon, which is said to symbolize success and rising above challenging situations. It's not my favorite because of what it represents, but simply because I think it's a beautiful bird.

7. ***What message(s) would you like readers to take away from THE BOOK OF SECOND CHANCES?***

Just that—finding your second chance and not being afraid to stumble a little along the way. It has taken me years to realize that the old cliché is true: If you do something you really love, then it will never feel like work. Emily took the easy route by hiding away and her grandmother let her, because it's hard to face up to your fears, to take that first step towards figuring out who you are and what your place in the world is.

I always dreamt of being an author, but it took me a long time to believe I was capable of turning it into a reality. As my wise old Nan herself told me, there has to be a reason why I have all these stories in my head, and wouldn't it be a waste not to write them down?