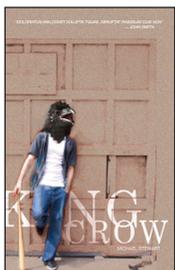


## Author Q&A: Michael Stewart



### KING CROW

(Bluemoose, £7.99)

**In Michael Stewart's debut novel *King Crow*, teenager Paul Cooper uses an obsession with bird watching to escape a troubled home life. Paul compares people he knows with different species of bird, and when he befriends a dangerous raven named Ashley he**

**embarks upon a chaotic journey of self-discovery. The book was the winner of the Guardian's 2011 Not The Booker prize.**

**Paul Cooper is a bird enthusiast. Is this a passion that you share with your protagonist?**

Well, it is now, yes. I did a lot of research into all things ornithological in order to understand Cooper as a character. I've always had an interest in nature, and particularly birds, but it hasn't really gone beyond the bird table. Now I have read just about every book on birds out there (with the exception of *Birding With Bill Oddie*).

**Which birds might certain people represent for Paul?**

Ashley, who Cooper is drawn to, is identified as a raven – a dark outcast. There is something dangerous about him, and he is also a hunted creature: feared and vilified by others.

Cooper sees his mum as a long tailed tit, which isn't really a tit at all. David

Cameron would be a collared dove: a fat shiny dullard no one wants at their table, who persists



nevertheless, squatting on everyone else's food and endlessly cooing.

**Why did you choose a teenage protagonist?**

There is something very dramatic about a 16-year-old's perspective. You are at the cusp of adulthood without any of the rights or status of being an adult. You are a misfit. At the same time, everything is possible. You have your whole world ahead of you and life seems to be one great big adventure. It is also a time of huge uncertainty, physical change and fear for one's future.

**The novel is based in Salford, where you grew up. To what extent is it autobiographical?**

There are things Cooper and I have in common: we are both from Salford, we were both excluded from school, we both have an interest in nature. Aside from that, I don't think there are any obvious links. As a writer, I relish invention. To create a character who is unique and distinctive is one of the great pleasures of putting pen to paper. Once I'd written the line "When I look at people, I wonder what sort of birds they are", Cooper's voice took over.

**How would you describe your writing style?**

Sort of heightened reality, I guess. Hyper-realism. Everything I do has a deep seam of black comedy running through it. I do think you have to laugh at the hangman; I can't see any other appropriate response really. At the same time, I love detail: the fine graining. That's why I like writers like Lionel Shriver, Douglas Coupland and Brett Easton Ellis. It is in the minute particulars that writing really succeeds at trumping reality.

**What bird do you most easily identify with?**

That's a difficult one. My favourite birds are vultures – they are incredibly beautiful and intelligent creatures who are full of individual character. But, alas, I'm not remotely like them. I think I am probably a jackdaw. A cocky scavenger: voluble, dark, covetous, gregarious, loyal to his own. An opportunist waiting hungrily in the shadows of life's feast.

FEMKE COLBORNE



### OFF THE SHELF

#### IN AN ANTIQUE LAND

*Amitav Ghosh*

(Granta, £9.99)

In the 1980s when Ghosh was an anthropology graduate in Lataifa, Egypt, he learned of the discovery of 12th century manuscripts including letters from a Jewish trader who owned an Indian slave in Muslim Egypt. Ghosh embarks on a fascinating social commentary on Egypt and India assessing how their class and belief systems have shaped each country's mindset.

#### THE OFFICIAL ARRSE GUIDE TO THE BRITISH ARMY

*Major Des Asto*

(Bantam Press, £12.99)

This is drawn from the wit and wisdom of the Army Rumour Service and is compiled by a serving officer in the British army. With a slightly boisterous tone that thrives on in-jokes, there are plenty of illustrations and lots of odd facts and figures but this is one mostly to be enjoyed by serving members and ex servicemen.

#### THE FALAFEL KING IS DEAD

*Sara Shilo*

(Portobello, £7.99)

Shilo follows the Moroccan-Jewish food traders on the northern borders of Israel who are under constant threat of missile attack from Lebanon. Exploring the grief and despair of a falafel maker's family after his death, this raw novel portrays a family's search for hope and draws on Shilo's real experiences of conflict in Israel.

#### VOICE OF AMERICA

*EC Osondu*

(Granta, £7.99)

Winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing 2009, this beautiful collection of stories expresses Nigerian life in a variety of ways. From Africa to America, dealing with kidnap to prostitution, it's a compelling read that has the ability to shock and awe but with enough humour and compassion to not lose its grip.

GEORGIA MAHER, EMMA ALSOP

LIANNE STEINBERG

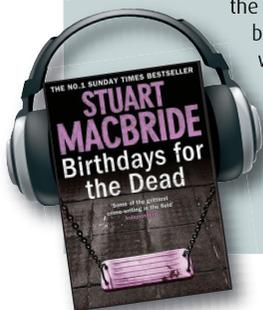
### LISTEN TO THIS

#### BIRTHDAYS FOR THE DEAD

*Stuart MacBride*

(www.audible.co.uk, £14.99)

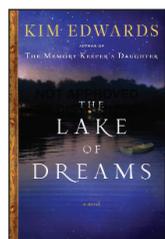
Gritty and unrelenting, this tale of young girls being abducted, mysterious birthday cards arriving after their disappearance and the strategies of a bent cop is not for the faint hearted but a perfect whodunnit for braver souls.



#### THE LAKE OF DREAMS

*Kim Edwards*

(Penguin, £7.99)



This follow-up to the best-selling novel *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* is a vibrant story that uses the elements and contrasting surroundings to convey the

heartwrenching aspects of family life.

Edwards tells the story of 29-year-old Lucy, a New Yorker who moved to Japan to work as a hydrologist. She lives there with her boyfriend Yoshi but the relationship is showing signs of strain. So when Lucy hears that her

mother has been involved in a car accident, it's a reason to escape her problems and pay a visit home.

Edwards lived in Japan so she aptly conveys the displacement Lucy experiences as she returns home to find life has moved on for family, friends and ex-lovers. However, when she stumbles upon a collection of letters in her mother's attic, a plethora of questions about the family's past come flooding through. Although this dramatic catalyst of unearthed skeletons in the closet is quite an obvious literary device, Edwards' easy turn of phrase and poetic tone offer a pleasant canvas for the depiction of a young woman's voyage of self-discovery.