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Birds of Wonder
by Cynthia Robinson

**A SMALL TOWN MURDER PROBES FAMILY TIES, HIDDEN SECRETS AND
CONSEQUENCES OF SEXUAL TRAUMA**

Certain characters are the stock in trade of detective novels: innocent murder victims (almost always female); detectives and their demons; husbands and their secrets; benign enablers and teenagers in foster homes. All of these find a home in Cynthia Robinson's forthcoming, novel *Birds of Wonder* [February 20, 2018, Standing Stone Books], which might suggest it's just another variation on a host of well-worn themes — but this cast, familiar as it is, still has the power to ensnare us. Set among the hills and lakes of upstate New York and told in six vibrantly distinct voices, this complex and original narrative chronicles the rippling effects of a young girl's death through a densely intertwined community. By turns funny, fierce, lyrical and horrifying, *Birds of Wonder* probes family ties, the stresses that break them, and the pasts that never really let us go.

One August morning while walking her dog, high-school English teacher Beatrice Ousterhout stumbles over the dead body of a student, Amber Inglin, who was to play the lead in Beatrice's production of John Webster's Jacobean tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi*. Barely able to speak, Beatrice calls the police. That is to say, she calls her daughter, Jes, a detective with two years of experience under her belt and a personal life featuring a history of risky behavior and a string of one-night-stands, including the owner of the field in which Beatrice has found Amber. In addition to a house and a field, Child Services lawyer Liam Walsh owns a vineyard, where Amber Inglin, along with a handful of other teens who've had difficulty negotiating the foster system, was an intern.

As she kneels beside the girl's body, half hidden beneath bushes, Jes is visited by flashbacks concerning her father, deceased a decade earlier. Charles Ashton was a world-renowned ornithologist with laboratories and conservation projects in such far-flung locations as Brazil and Thailand. Once a budding ornithologist herself, on a visit to her father's lab in

Thailand the summer following her sophomore year in college, Jes discovered that her father was a habitual patron of underage prostitutes. This secret, never shared with her mother—who continues to exist in blithe denial concerning the fissures and cracks in her marriage—has haunted the entirety of Jes’s adult life, leading to a series of risky choices, promiscuity, and other self-destructive tendencies. And it continues to haunt her as she confronts the case before her, skewing her perceptions, deductions, decisions and actions.

The book has deep roots in Robinson's own past. “When I was fifteen, a girl was brutally murdered in my small town of Jackson, Tennessee. Eerily, she was very similar to me in physical appearance,” she recalls. “And I’ve had other, closer encounters, both personally and through friends, with sexual violence, harassment, addiction and exploitation. A number of the characters and situations in *Birds of Wonder* are drawn from real-life experiences, either mine or those of people to whom I am close.”

Birds of Wonder brings the reader face-to-face with these unsettling and timely themes, as s/he navigates the intricate webs that connect the characters one to another against the backdrop of a small town where “things like this don’t happen.” Until they do.

About the Author:

Cynthia Robinson is a writer and art historian based in Ithaca, New York. Her short fiction has been published by *The Arkansas Review*, *Epoch*, *The Missouri Review*, *Slice*, and others. She is Mary Donlon Alger Professor of Medieval and Islamic Art at Cornell University and has recently, following a very long hiatus, returned to fiction with her first novel, *Birds of Wonder*.

***Birds of Wonder* will be available via Amazon and other fine booksellers on February 20, 2018. To learn more visit cynthiarobinsonbooks.com and connect with Robinson on [Goodreads](#) and [Instagram](#).**

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