

H IS FOR HAWK HELEN MACDONALD

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Helen Macdonald is a very experienced and enthusiastic falconer. When her father died suddenly on a London street, she was devastated. In an attempt to cope with her grief, she decided to buy and train one of the most difficult and aggressive of birds of prey, the goshawk. The experience changed her life. She said: 'The book is a memoir about that year when I lost my father and trained a hawk'.

Macdonald's book, published in 2013, won the Samuel Johnson Prize and Costa Book of the Year Award (both highly prestigious awards in the UK and Ireland). One reviewer, Mark Cocker, said: 'More than any other writer I know, Macdonald is able to **summon** the mental world of a bird of prey... As a naturalist she has somehow acquired her bird's laser-like visual **acuity**'. In addition, he praised her writing for its verbal inventiveness and precision.

GENERAL VOCABULARY

summon in this case, bring an image into the reader's mind

acuity the keenness or sharpness of something such as sight

BEFORE YOU START READING

- 1 Find out what you can about goshawks and what makes them different from other birds of prey.
- 2 Find some pictures of hawks on the internet. Try to think of some words or phrases to describe them and their apparent 'personalities'.
- 3 What is hawking? What do you think might be the rewards of training a goshawk with which to go hawking?

▼ FROM *H IS FOR HAWK* BY HELEN MACDONALD

When Macdonald's father died suddenly of a heart attack, Macdonald was devastated. An experienced falconer, she adopted a goshawk to distract her from her grief. In this extract Macdonald meets her hawk for the first time.

'We'll check the ring numbers against the **Article 10s**,' he explained, pulling a sheaf of yellow paper from his rucksack and unfolding two of the official forms that accompany captive-bred rare birds throughout their lives. 'Don't want you going home with the wrong bird.'

We noted the numbers. We stared down at the boxes, at their parcel-tape handles, their doors of thin plywood and hinges of carefully tied string. Then he knelt on the concrete, untied a hinge on the smaller box and squinted into its dark interior. A sudden *thump* of feathered shoulders and the box shook as if someone had punched it, hard, from within. 'She's got her hood off,' he said, and frowned. That light, leather hood was to keep the hawk from fearful sights. Like us.

Another hinge untied. Concentration. Infinite caution. Daylight irrigating the box. Scratching talons, another thump. And another.

Article 10s Certificates required for rare or endangered species sold in the UK.