



## The Night Birds

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The intertwining story of three generations of German immigrants to the Midwest—their clashes with slaveholders, the Dakota uprising and its aftermath—is seen through the eyes of young Asa Senger, named for an uncle killed by an Indian friend. It is the unexpected appearance of Asa's aunt Hazel, institutionalized since shortly after the mass hangings of thirty-eight Dakota warriors in Mankato in 1862, that reveals to him that the past is as close as his own heartbeat.

## **The Night Birds Details**

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Author : Thomas Maltman

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## From Reader Review The Night Birds for online ebook

### Diane Barnes says

If you feel the need to jump into a time machine and travel back in time to Minnesota in 1862, during the great Sioux uprising that left hundreds of German settlers and Dakota Indians dead, just open the pages of this book. It actually spans the years between 1846-1876, with an epilogue that takes us to 1921. Asa Senger is a young boy just on the brink of manhood when his Aunt Hazel comes to stay with them. Her tales of her childhood enthrall him, and reaches a place deep inside him that changes the course of his life.

The paragraph above is a simple recap of the basic plot, but gives you no inkling of the depth of this book. This first novel by Thomas Maltman takes us there in mind and spirit, putting you inside two room cabins and teepees on the plains. The characters on both sides of the conflict are real enough to make you feel both joy and pain at events, making you hope for the best, even when you know it's impossible. We get both sides of the story, from the white settlers who take and take and take, trying to make a better life for themselves, and the Dakota Sioux, watching their land and livelihood disappear because of the greed of the white man who assumes superiority. There is, of course, love and hate in these pages, but also mystery and spirituality, shame at what we are doing to destroy the natural world, and the importance of family, no matter what color your skin is.

This book comes under the heading of one of my favorite book genres, pioneer tales, showing us the courage and determination of the people who settled this country, and the people who were here before us. A lot of this tale is based on historical fact, with special guest appearances by a flock of passenger pigeons (now extinct), and Frank and Jesse James. Those scenes, along with the quality of the writing, put this book over the top for me.

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### Ashley Olson says

Another (though I should say the first) incredible, beautiful novel from Mr. Maltman. I was so stunned and awed by the first I read, "Little Wolves," that I immediately read this book. Growing up on the plains of Minnesota where "The Night Birds" took place, I now have a much deeper sense of this buried period of not only Minnesotan, but U.S. history. Maltman so gorgeously depicts both the Native American and pioneer sides of historical events and people I barely remember learning about, like Wounded Knee and Little Crow. Definitely every Minnesotan should read this book to be pulled back to their roots, but anyone is bound to be floored by the talent and truth (and, as I was so impressed with in "Little Wolves," the tremendous research) evident in Maltman's storytelling.

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### Caroline Bartels says

This was SOOOO good, so intense, just really, really well done! Maybe it's because I'm from South Dakota and grew up in the area and know all the places to which Maltman refers, and I'm half-German and grew up knowing all the German and Norwegian folklore and stories of settlers, this book really struck a chord. I still read all of the Little House books about every 10 years since when I first finished the series as a 5th grader, and now I'm in my mid-40s, but there was so much of that story here, the struggle to survive on the prairie, to cope with the harshness of the landscape with few people around who can actually help. Such a beautiful weaving of the story of the Dakota Sioux who were in the area and the constant tension between the settlers

and the native people to get along. Less bleak than *Giants in the Earth*, but in some ways much harsher because of the emotional impact that the interactions between the two groups -- both sweet and violent -- has on the reader is intense. Highly recommended!

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### Wyndy says

4.5 superb stars. I've read some outstanding books the past few months, but nothing has grabbed and twisted my emotions like this one: hate, love, horror, sympathy, sorrow - immense sorrow. Nothing has immersed me so completely in a dark chapter of history that I knew so little about: the Dakota War Of 1862, which resulted in the largest mass execution in U.S. history.

The book begins with the birth of Asa Senger, now fourteen and a third generation Midwest settler. Hazel Senger, Asa's aunt, has miraculously survived the early settlement of both the Missouri and Minnesota plains in the 1850's, the Dakota War Of 1862, and a ten-year stint in an insane asylum and returns to the family homestead to tell Asa her tale: "All her life she had only been a witness for the things that happened, never someone with the power to shape events."

Maltman writes a complex, multi-layered, meticulously researched book about early pioneering in the Midwest and the ongoing disputes between white settlers, the U.S. government and various tribes of Indians. It's blood and guts and rape and wolf-dogs and mothers who abandon their children and feathers and breechclouts and scalps with brains attached and shattering hailstorms and devouring locusts and reading Thoreau by tallow candle and snow blindness and near starvation and spirits and Judas flowers and sacred stones and an eye for an eye and birds birds birds . . . blackbirds, crows, pigeons, der nacht vogel. And survival and absolution and hope. Characters you will never forget. All this in a debut novel - incredible. A gripping, emotional journey highly recommended to anyone who enjoys first-rate historical, literary fiction.

"I set this down now for him, for the day of his return. This was all foretold long ago. A time I saw the world end and walked through the wreckage to witness its rebirth. "This is where you come from," my book will say, "this is what you are." ~ Hazel Senger

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### Miss\_otis says

14-year-old Asa Senger is intrigued when his mysterious Aunt Hazel, recently released from an asylum, comes to stay with his family in frontier Minnesota. Come to find out, the townspeople say Hazel is/was an Indian lover (physically and simply emotionally), and they're none too welcoming, much like Asa's mother. Hazel's not very forthcoming with details of her past, but little by little, Asa gathers his family's history from her, and boy, is there history.

I liked this book a *lot*. I'm a big fan of realistic-feeling frontier tales, where frontier life's not romanticized, where all the hard realities are there, stated fairly simply and not stressed by the writer as "SEE HOW TERRIBLE IT WAS", but where the writer uses the POVs of his characters to show the harshness of such a life. I'm a bigger fan of writers who approach the Native American Position on Settlers from an angle of resentment *and* tentative acceptance/friendship, and who are able to make the reader understand, at least a little bit, why both the white folk and the tribes would resent each other while getting along in some ways.

Hazel's personal history, and therefore the history of Asa's family, is woven around an actual historic

incident, the Sioux uprising of 1862, which ended in the largest mass execution in US history.

Maltman does a lovely job of using history as an underlying current in his story, builds thoughtful, complex characters, creates scenarios which seem true to time period and location, and doesn't make anything at all easy, which is certainly how it should be. There's nothing easy about early relations between settlers and the Native Americans; it's traumatic and heart-breaking on both sides.

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### **Lynne says**

This is a wrenching but beautifully written tragedy about the conflict between the Dakota Sioux and the American army and settlers. It is based on accounts from both the Dakota and the Europeans who ended up in Minnesota in the mid 1800s and is focused on the story of a girl with the gift of healing who cannot stop what is to come. The use of dreams to foretell and understand is masterful as is the recurring image of the crows. I love the final scene where something stops a young boy from throwing stones at two that watch. His father speaks German: "Hugin and Munin...Like brothers they return. Or so your great-grandfather Jakob would say." "Yes (the boy says). "I remember their names. Memory and Understanding."

It is an Alex Award Winner, given to adult books with special appeal to teens who read at that level.

Maltman will be in Winona (mentioned in book) Nov. 10.

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### **Kelly says**

The one-line version: a tear-jerker, but worth it.

This was a heartwrenching illustration of early settlers and native Americans' parallel struggles to eke out life and meaning in the 1800s, set mostly in the Ozarks and in Minnesota. It's based in actual historic events, a conflict between natives and settlers that happened during the Civil War. Officially it's a young adult novel, but it doesn't shy away from or sugarcoat any of what actually happened. A lot of the characters are kids passing into adulthood under what are unimaginably difficult circumstances. They embody hope and courage and some of them have serious dark sides. Many face circumstances in which there are no right choices.

Among my favorite lines: " ... her stories left tracks in me and I was not the same after."

And this, improbable but good, from Jesse James (yep, that one): "I've seen and done terrible things. ... We aren't anything before what's coming. An age of machines. The great plains tribes will fall before the Gatling gun. Wires will whirl a voice across mountains and deserts in a bling. The railroads and steamships will go on reducing ocean and distance into nothing. I stand in the way of such an age. I want to throw a cog into the churning wheels of these machines. Such things will consume us."

I was sorry to see this end and I'll remember it one for a long time. The land around me -- I live in a city on the edge of the Plains, in a neighborhood where streets are named after native tribes -- seemed more alive after I read it. There was nothing formulaic about it. In fact it took me a little effort to get into it because in the beginning it was almost mythopoetic, narrative that was all about reaching deep into the dark to create meaning from loss. Later some of the plot twists created so much narrative tension that I absolutely couldn't

put the book down. The phrase "crescendo of tragedy" comes to mind.

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## **Tina says**

Kirk,

This was the last book you gave our little group to read before your life was taken on the side of the road after a day of sailing your treasured boat. I am sorry our group never got to read and discuss *The Night Birds* with you. I feel like you chose this book for us because you had read another book by Thomas Maltman and you were impressed by his work. I wonder, did you know we were all destined to love this novel? Did you know how epic and emotional it would be?

While the Civil War was breaking out another war was brewing that we didn't focus on in our American history books. It was the The Sioux Uprising, The Dakota Conflict, The Indian Wars and it was extremely important in our nations history. A war of American's fighting to survive and Indians fighting for what we took from them, their lands, their livelihood.

I think it is important to remember our history. We like to try to erase history these days. Sweep it under the rug. Tear it down. Hide it away. Point fingers. Lay blame on others. The truth is that you cannot erase history. It is important to remember our history so that we can learn from it. Learn from the the things we did well and from the mistakes we have made so that we will not repeat them. Work together and not tear each other to shreds. Maltman's book, although fiction, is a history lesson to remember and learn from.

The amount of research that culminated into *The Night Birds* is worth noting. The presentation of this epic and multi-generational saga by Maltman is masterful. Beautiful words and imagery. Bloody conflict and pain. So well done you could smell the campfires, feel the rain, smell the blood and the damp earth. *Night Birds* is a roller coaster of emotions, but an amazing historical account of a little talked about part of America's history. A part of history we would do well to remember and learn from.

Kirk, thank you for this book that I read so slowly while savoring every word that weeds came up in my flowerbeds, the seasons changed, and the leaves on the trees became multi-colored and beautiful. This book gets my five star classic rating because it is worthy of being read for generations to come.

TINA

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## **Ned says**

This is some of the finest fiction I've read from a new writer for me. Thanks to the dear departed Kirk and my friends for helping me find this author. I'll read his body of work now and give this one. Full review later.

This is the style of novel that works well for me. I can learn some real history and the characters are rich, entertaining and seem authentic for the time. Especially I loved the visit from the James brothers, as I recall their misadventure in Minnesota, and they have a history in my local Missouri. The brutality of the battles was grisly and realistic. 2018 was the year of the native American for me, and this was my fourth of the type, and my favorite. Maltman has a special gift for understanding men and women and familial love. The bird theme was throughout, and a constant reminder of the spirit world that inhabited these characters. Some felt

this novel jumped around too much, and the case of characters complicated, but I found it well structured and the layers built on each other nicely. It is perhaps a characteristic of historical novels, and there were a few logical gaffes, but overall the style was effective for me. This was an emotional novel, and touched me deeply in the maternal and otherworldly love that the main character Hazel brought - she was a heroine to me.

p. 22: "I hesitated, thinking on the bits of information I'd managed to wheedle from my mother over the last nine days. That Aunt Hazel 'knew things a Christian woman out not to,' her way of implying the woman was a witch. That Aunt Hzel hadn't resisted when taken captive, had wanted it even. Now this woman stodd before me and she was not the wispy, white-haired vision I had imagine. Not a woman with faraway eyes and long yellow fingernails, but one who looked you straight in the face and saw the fears you hid in your underbelly and smelled the regret on your skin. To tell the truth, she frightened me. But despite certain recent lapses, I was an obedient child and so went to her and let her put her on my cheeks until I looked up into her eyes and tried to still the quivering in my stomach. Only a woman does a thing like that: takes you into her hands like she held a sparrow and was divining its lifespan, the good and the bad. Men are keen about other things, but not very often about people. Aunt Hazel didn't say anything about what she saw in my eyes, not at that time."

p. 48, some beautiful yet ominous nature writing: "A white flash rippled and faded outside the window, followed by a close grumble of thunder. It was early in the year for such weather; a surge of warm air that came from the south and made men think and act in ways that went against nature."

p. 143, Maltman's exquisite descriptions of bodily sensation: "Jakob felt it first, an itch that spread through his hands and arms like the pox. No sores, appeared on his winter-pale skin, but he couldn't stop scratching. It spread from him to all of them, and invisible rash that burrowed into their veins. Hazel tried everything: a lotion of mullein leaves, tea made from willow bark, but the itch continued to burn beneath their skin like prickles of white-hot flame...They wanted to tear the very skin from their flesh, to strip themselves down to sinew and ligament.

p. 346, on the precipice of consciousness / death " There is a place inside us beyond blood and breath. Picture rolling grassland spilling over the edge of a cliff in a green wave. The other side of the cliff is molten with rivers of light winding toward the jaws of the mountains. All around you smell the rain, and in the wind there are voices of those you lost. You are afraid of this edge inside of you, of what will happen when you step over. Maybe in your ordinary days you forget it even exists. Children know it, and the elderly."

p. 358, Jesse James' sadness for what will be lost: "We aren't anything before what's coming. An age of machines. The great plains tribes will fall before the Gatling gun. Wires will whirl a voice across mountains and deserts in a blink. The railroads and steamships will go on reducing ocean and distance into nothing. I stand in the way of such an age. I want to throw a cog into the churning wheels of these machines. Such things will consume us."

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## **Laura says**

As another friend has said this book was a journey and one worth taking. This was a perfect historic fictional account of the US Dakota Conflict (Great Sioux war of 1862). I don't know how the author could have written this any better. This one will hit you in the feels. Highly recommend!!!

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### **brianna says**

I really loved Little Wolves by Maltman and I really liked this. It appears that it was well-researched, though I don't know enough about the history of the Dakotas to definitively say. I will say that every character was created with depth and Maltman avoided stereotypes of the "noble savage" and "white saviour" effectively. I think the most striking aspect of the novel was the palpable tensions between white settler and Dakotas as war and conflict begin to brew, and how this influences the relationships between the children, who all play together until they grow older and the tensions begin to make their friendships 'taboo' and untrustworthy.

Even minor characters who were pretty hate-able like Henrietta were still written in a realistic way so that you couldn't hate them without empathizing with what brought them to that point.

Overall, this is a great historical fiction novel, and Maltman did a beautiful job interweaving the stories of 3 generations of family into one coherent story.

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### **Anastasia says**

If I could give this more stars I would. Fantastic book and a fantastic person to know.

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### **karen says**

this isnt a book that hides its secrets well - but it still tells a good story. its not as laced with the grimms tales at the jacket copy would suggest, and it gets a little muddy in places; the tone is uneven - sometimes rushed, sometimes drawn-out, but its a good read and a great first book.

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### **Noel says**

“...the night birds, der nacht vogel, birds that led humans out of sorrow.”

I thoroughly enjoyed this novel which discussed life in the perspective of both Native Americans and European immigrants during this country's early years of turmoil. In occupying such a close proximity the groups were bound to intermingle. Unfortunately, stereotypes have the ability to influence hatred without providing a reason to loathe the particular person. The fear held for those who were different but also an overcoming curiosity was painted in detail. The war context enabled the author to demonstrate how similar people are; each group was struggling to survive at any cost. This book has everything: interracial love, suffering, burdensome relatives, war, sex, murder, folklore, and “magic,” even an appearance by Jesse James. I actually had a hard time putting it down. More than a coming of age, it was about Asa discovering how he was intertwined with history. Listening to a story of the repeated traumatic events that happened to his family, Asa's own future unfolds.

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### **Ellen E. Baldwin (Quest Reviews) says**

Okay... ahem... full disclosure: I'm going to do my level BEST to get you to read this little, unknown piece of historical fiction. Be prepared.

It's crazy how this book first popped on my radar. It was either 2009 or 2010 and I was browsing the stacks at my local library. I picked up *The Night Birds* because I got a good feeling from it, like some sort of wacky, mystical book-sniffer. Two days later, I'd finished the novel and felt like I'd just stepped off an emotional tilt-a-whirl.

I've only ever read this book once. My library no longer has a copy (probably my fault; I took the book along with me on a kayaking trip aaaaand kind of dropped it in a river) and I have a hunch that it's out of print. Now that I think on it, I should really hunt down a copy and purchase it. All of this is to say, my memory of the book's particulars are unfortunately fuzzy.

What I remember most starkly, however, are the huge waves of emotion that I felt while reading *The Night Birds*. Huge, huge waves of feelings. Also, I remember being deeply impressed by the overall quality of the novel.

The book is set during the Civil War era in the rural midwest. Think *Little House on the Prairie*, but written for an older audience. Our narrator is a boy, Asa, and the story begins when his aunt Hazel comes to stay with his family on their farm. Hazel has been released from an asylum, and it becomes clear that she suffers from epilepsy and the memories of lost love and disappointments. She and Asa form a close bond. It's a relationship rarely seen in fiction — that of an aunt and her nephew, but it's a very beautiful rapport that the two share in *The Night Birds*.

What happens next is intense and heartbreaking. It has to do with the Dakota Indians and their last-ditch struggles to escape the stranglehold of the white men, which resulted in staggering violence and tragedy. I will not try to hide it from you; there is blood in *The Night Birds*. It's shocking, and hard to read, but what's important to remember is that the Dakota Conflict of 1862 is a real historical event, and it often gets overshadowed in the history books by the Civil War.

What Maltman does so well in *The Night Birds*, is he humanizes the people on either side of the conflict. We get to see the beauty of the Dakota lifestyle, how it is threatened, and their growing desperation that culminates in mass murder. We also understand the plight of the white pioneers, and their struggles. What Maltman doesn't provide us is relief from the reality of what happened. Because of this, *The Night Birds* is hard to read.

Huh. I'm not doing such a great job at selling this book, am I? Ah, well. Just trust me when I say that *The Night Birds* has transformative power. It's a beautiful piece of literature and an accomplishment of historical fiction. By God, read it.

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