



Superdove: How the Pigeon Took Manhattan ... And the World

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Why do we see pigeons as lowly urban pests and how did they become such common city dwellers?

Courtney Humphries traces the natural history of the pigeon, recounting how these shy birds that once made their homes on the sparse cliffs of sea coasts came to dominate our urban public spaces. While detailing this evolution, Humphries introduces us to synanthropy: The concept that animals can become dependent on humans without ceasing to be wild; they can adapt to the cityscape as if it were a field or a forest.

Superdove simultaneously explores the pigeon's cultural transformation, from its life in the dovecotes of ancient Egypt to its service in the trenches of World War I, to its feats within the pigeon-racing societies of today. While the dove is traditionally recognized as a symbol of peace, the pigeon has long inspired a different sort of fetishistic devotion from breeders, eaters, and artists—and from those who recognized and exploited the pigeon's astounding abilities. Because of their fecundity, pigeons were symbols of fertility associated with Aphrodite, while their keen ability to find their way home made them ideal messengers and even pilots.

Their usefulness largely forgotten, today's pigeons have become as ubiquitous and reviled as rats. But *Superdove* reveals something more surprising: By using pigeons for our own purposes, we humans have changed their evolution. And in doing so, we have helped make pigeons the ideal city dwellers they are today. In the tradition of *Rats*, the book that made its namesake rodents famous, *Superdove* is the fascinating story of the pigeon's journey from the wild to the city—the home they'll never leave.

Superdove: How the Pigeon Took Manhattan ... And the World Details

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Melissa says

While there are gaps in Humphries' research, the topic itself is a rich one and this book opens up further social-history research into the subject of the urban pigeon, a most resilient and fascinating species. And while I would have liked the author to explore the relevant social angles more robustly rather than so personally, I could not help but see why her stories always also veered towards the personal observations since she seems to have become very emotionally involved--more than she expected to. It's an interesting book that weaves together different strands of a great story on an under-studied but fascinating bird population.

Mollie says

I really enjoyed this book. It was quirky, funny, and covered many different facets of what it means to be a pigeon and what that relationship means to human beings.

I learned about how Pigeon messaging actually works and the sort of... strange sense of nobility the bird once held in role. As well as their role with humans when they were considered a source of food and were domesticated as such in juxtaposition to how pigeons are viewed today on the street. I didn't realize pigeons have such a rich history.

Mostly I loved the sense of humor with which the topic was treated and I very much enjoyed that the book was written in and about locations in my home city of Boston.

Um..yay.

Elaine Nelson says

This was book was rad! It's been about a month since I read it, so some of the details are fuzzy, but it was totally enjoyable. Read it on the plane/in the airport, and my biggest complaint is that it's so quick & short that I ended up having to buy a book for my return trip. (I read both this and the Ida Tarbell book on the trip out.)

Covers the pigeon as a historical, scientific, and cultural phenomenon, including both pigeon fanciers (like Darwin!) and pigeon mothers (people who feed urban birds), plus Skinner's attempt at guided missiles. Makes the case for the urban pigeon as a special case in the animal kingdom: neither wild nor domesticated, but evolved to co-exist in proximity to human settlement. (Will the same prove true of raccoons in North America?) Lots of interesting characters met along the way.

Maria says

I'm pretty sure that the title and cover image were put together by the publisher without much input from the author, because I thought the book was much more subtle and thought-provoking than you might guess from the "superdove" picture (but an easy and pleasurable read nonetheless). Humphries does a wonderful job of exploring our conceptions about invasive species, what being "wild" and "natural" really means, the wonder that is evolution, and a lot else, all through the lens of a creature that, when you take a closer look, disrupts a lot of our usual categories.

The story of the pigeon captures a lot about the big story of "man and nature" and Humphries does a great job of presenting the intimate and changing history of our relationship with this bird, including the divergent attitudes of scientists today. Really, she doesn't just present one story, but manages to present many different stories of the pigeon, past and present, and they are often very surprising. I came away from this book knowing more about Darwin, urban ecology, ornithology, the dynamics of activism, oddball hobbyists, the practice of science, B.F. Skinner, and the Swiss nanny state! I think this is science writing at its best--informative and perspective changing. In a time when we are increasingly grappling with our role on the planet, the story of the pigeon turns out to have a lot of relevance!

Mike says

I have just finished the unique story about pigeons. This lighthearted study of this bird gives the reader a new way to look at the pigeon and how it has impacted our lives.

Ms Humphries gives us her own personal look as she expresses her study of these birds, while keeping it light, she fills us with knowledge and the unexpected look at the value of these birds. If you are looking for something strangely interesting, this could be the book to pick up and read.

mike says

I picked this book up and set it down dozens of times over the months it took me to get through it. I ran through "Rats" much faster. Why?

In short, "Rats" had a more compelling narrator, if only in his neurotic stalking of the four-legged vermin. "Superdove" isn't exactly a scholarly work -- its author, Courtney Humphries, is clearly aiming for a mass audience -- but what she crafts is ultimately less a narrative about, and more a study of, the bird city-dwellers love to hate. The "Rats" author knew people would think he was a deviant from the get-go and he used this to his storytelling advantage. Humphries doesn't go for this device, instead choosing to present information for information's sake. She assumes the reader will have an initial interest in the subject matter and presents things in a very straightforward manner, never going for the "I know you think I'm crazy" angle.

Her approach of preaching to the converted has its perils, considering that pigeons have a fairly limited, if vocal, fan base. The book might have benefited from having some of the more accessible later chapters placed closer to the front of the book. In these late chapters, she describes the bread-scattering "pigeon mothers" and discusses her own growing fondness for the maligned bird. I'm sure that her own interest came only after the extensive study that she describes in the earlier chapters, but part of a good narrative line is knowing when to depart from the chronological.

The paradoxical thing is that I don't feel I know a lot more about everyday pigeon life after having read this book. Just before I completed it, I saw a dead pigeon on the sidewalk and, rather than taking a picture myself

for the blog entry I intended to write, I went to flickr instead and searched for "dead pigeon." I learned as much from the comments on some of those photos as I did from this book.

From the book, I do know a lot more about "fancy" pigeon breeds, homing pigeons, pigeons' roles in various wars... but I don't feel like I know that much more about the everyday pigeon pecking at the sidewalk outside my building. I think Humphries spent so much time telling me why the species is important that she forgot to tell me why to value the ones I see every day. I know from her book that she would want me to come away with this impression. But I'm not feeling it.

Tom Hynes says

This book is fine, but I have no idea why the word "Manhattan" is on the cover. I guess I have a few more pages left, but so far the book has almost NOTHING to do with NYC.

Rossdavidh says

Superdove (Subtitle: How the Pigeon Took Manhattan...and the World) by Courtney Humphries

Courtney Humphries has for her focus in this book the humble rock dove. Excuse me, it's no longer known officially as a rock dove, they changed the name to rock pigeon, because the opinion of this bird (known to most of us as pigeons, aka rats with wings) had dropped so much that the people whose job it is to determine such things could not stomach the idea of it being called a dove.

There's plenty of pigeons in the book, but really much of what is fascinating about the story in Superdove is how our species' opinion of theirs changes from one century to the next, and what that says about us. Pigeons have risen in sync with the rise of grain agriculture, and the cities that created, and in our dislike of pigeons there is much of modern humanity's self-loathing. Of course, there are also a minority who not only like, but actively feed, pigeons in a way that, say, rats without wings rarely are. Humphries talks to those who raise pigeons for food, those who raise them for racing, and those who raise them to demonstrate how weird they can look (Charles Darwin was once one of these). She watches them in her own city, and most of all she realizes how little most of us (including herself) notice them. In every aspect of this, she is good at providing us the facts first and primarily, and often from personal experience as well as in the words of experts (including pigeon fanciers or racers, some of whom thought Humphries was an animal-rights spy). You see pigeons every day; here's a book that tells you what you're looking at (hint: it's not a rodent).

Sam Nigh says

I'm not as a rule, interested in birds, but I was interested in learning more about Rock Pigeons and how they have come to dominate the urban landscape. I'm not sure I have learned much additional from this book, except to call them 'Rock Pigeons', Egyptians kept pigeons, and there are much better books on this topic than 'SuperDove.'

I would gladly read anything, short story, blog post, or article written by Courtney Humphries . Her chapter

writing is fine and enjoyable, but where is the book? It's her first book and she randomly interjected her own reflections randomly throughout, mostly toward the end of chapters where it feels like filler. If she'd clearly expanded on all her research, she would have more than enough material. She herself says pigeon history is thousands of years old. My main issue is the chapter organization; if I'd cut my book apart by chapter and randomly reshuffled all of the them (except the 1st chapter) it would have made about as much sense as the end result.

Courtney Humphries please keep writing books, but please learn from writing your first!

Matt says

A fun, quick, entertaining read full of information about pigeons. Perhaps not as funny as it could have been (I'd love to see this subject matter in Mary Roach's hands), but solid. I'd recommend to anyone who has ever thought, "What's their deal?" when seeing a bunch of pigeons walking down the street or perched on a wire.

D. says

There are a few amazing features of this well written story of how pigeons have "fitted" into the world humans have made. The research is so careful, and spans several branches of science. I encourage reading this- even if you haven't time to do it in two stints, it is just as enjoyable if spread out over a year, or even longer. But I'll bet you get hooked, and finish it much more quickly!

Steven says

I liked this little book. The author interviews pigeon breeders, pigeon racers, behavioral scientists and pigeon enthusiasts to find out more about this once-domesticated but now feral creature that exists in our midst, yet is so easy to ignore. I liked how she juxtaposed the average urban dweller's apathy (or downright disgust) towards these birds with the clever existences they've carved out for themselves.

The most fascinating part I found was her description of how pigeons' focus and visual accuracy was harnessed to do quality control in the manufacture of pharmaceutical capsules. But when people found out pigeons were performing this task, they couldn't wrap their brains around (supposedly) stupid, filthy birds doing this kind of work. This, despite their better accuracy than human inspectors.

On a personal note, I was really looking forward to reading this on my lunch hour. I imagined myself glancing at the pigeons that hang out around my building from time to time to compare and verify all the interesting things I was reading about pigeon morphology and behavior. Sadly, the usual flock of birds was very aloof and spent those days sitting on a far away rooftop. Perhaps they were a little self-conscious under all the scrutiny? Or maybe they were weirded-out by the goofy book jacket (see below).

Although I liked this book, I felt very sorry for the author. I think the publisher really did her a disservice with the title and the jacket design. The concept of the "superdove" was mentioned on only a few pages, only one chapter involved Manhattan in any way -- and that chapter was more about bickering pigeon-lovers than pigeons themselves, and the picture on the front is both ridiculous and creepy. I'm sure that some suit somewhere thought that sales could be boosted with these ploys, but they're puzzling more than anything

else.

Also, this book reminded me of one of my favorite Sesame Street segments that I enjoyed when I was a kid. It's Bert, Doin' the Pigeon.

A Diveglia says

Despite the atrocious and distressing cover (publisher: what were you thinking?!), this book is a pretty thorough natural history of the pigeon and its rise as the ubiquitous urban bird. The author eats squab, peeks into pigeon-centric aviaries, seeks out wild rock doves, attends a pigeon lovers' meeting, and generally gives us glimpses into different aspects of pigeonry (pigeonry?). I'd love a little more information about the ways that pigeons and other animals can co-develop alongside humans without becoming "domesticated", but maybe that's another book.

Adi says

I'm glad I read this so soon after Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird; they cover a lot of the same territory, but Blechman went heavier on the natural history and colorful modern pigeon world characters... which was nice, except that the prose was *plodding*. It was good to already know that kind of thing, as it was what I was after, reading this; *Superdove* has more cultural history, which isn't so much what I wanted, but it's a much better *book*. Better organized, better written--it's compared somewhere on the jacket to Rats: Observations on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants, and I'd agree. Neither of them are quite as lovely as they could be--they're so close, it makes the errors and slips, the lapses into lazier prose, more glaring--but they're definitely a cut above.

Cheryl says

There's just not been a lot of research on pigeons, and so there's not a lot of material for Humphries to work with... which means this book covers a lot of ground fairly superficially and is still short.

Which further means that it's a pretty fun read for the casual armchair naturalist. More engaging, imo, than the others of the type that I've read recently: Weeds and Subirdia.

Also do know that she's a science writer... a journalist. Not a scientist. Generally that perspective makes for a flawed work, but this seemed to me just fine.

And I agree with her, and with the authors of Feral Pigeons, that pigeons would make a great study subject *because* they are neither truly wild nor truly domesticated.

3.5 stars rounded up because it was just a pleasure to read.

So what's your favorite book about synanthropes?

Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus wrote poetry about evolution. I wonder why this is the first I've heard of it. Must try to find examples. Erasmus Darwin

