

# Flights of Fancy

Audubon, On the Wings of the World

BY FABIEN GROLLEAU AND JÉRÉMIE ROYER

Nobrow Press, 2017, 184 pages

*Audubon, On the Wings of the World* isn't a biography of the famed ornithologist John James Audubon. Strictly speaking, it's not even wholly nonfiction, as it takes certain liberties with the subject and the setting. The foreword notes forthrightly that the book is a romanticized story inspired by Audubon's writings, which famously took creative license of their own.

"Romanticized" is a good word to describe this lushly illustrated graphic novel, by the French author-illustrator duo of Grolleau and Royer, whose birds and landscapes are drawn with expressive care (much like Audubon's own lovingly detailed watercolors). The book traces Audubon's ornithological expedition across America, which begins in 1820 with the young naturalist leaving his family behind in Kentucky. (He would spend much of the next two decades on the road.) Setting out with the quixotic aim of documenting every type of bird in America, the trip brings him to far-flung corners of the North American continent. Along the way, he and his assistants encounter illness, theft, destitution, and — most importantly — previously unrecorded species of birds.

A key tension in this journey, which culminates in Audubon's epic illustrated work *Birds of America*, is between art and science. Audubon craves the legitimacy of the scientific establishment, yet bristles against certain conventions of natural history. Typical wildlife illustrations of the time, he feels, are inert, detached. They don't capture the energy of the birds he loves.

Rather than being detached, *Audubon*, like its protagonist's work, has its flights of fancy. In one scene, for instance, it depicts a fevered and delirious Audubon imagining a bird morphing into a rival ornithologist, Alexander Wilson.

Audubon's love of a still largely undeveloped country shines through the pages. We see birds through his appreciative eyes: the remarkable stillness of an owl, the sweeping drama of a flock of swallows, the collective spirit of brown thrashers.

We also see some of the tricky balances of the natural historian's life: not only between art and science, or between humans and nonhuman animals, but between conservation and curiosity. Audubon is a prolific hunter who thinks nothing of shooting down dozens of birds to hone his studies and art, a taxidermist who needs his specimens to be dead in order to portray them as full of life. He's also a bit of a dreamer — a scientist who attempts the impossible task of counting every bird in a flock.

Whether due to space constraints or to a desire to maintain a lyrical tone, the book glosses over some of the more problematic parts of Audubon's story. It *does* show that Audubon viewed Native Americans as "noble savages," evident in his longing for a lifestyle in perfect harmony with

nature. A lifestyle, he imagines, which only Indigenous Americans can reclaim. However, the novel doesn't mention that Audubon owned slaves, or his failures to give due credit to his assistants. Nor is much attention given to Audubon's bread-winning wife and their children back at home.

Like Audubon with his winged subjects, Grolleau and Royer display a strong affection for their subject, wanting to fix a particular (unblemished) image of him for posterity. Yet exploration of this central conflict, of a man who loved birds but had uneasy relationships with his fellow humans, would have strengthened the book.

Whatever its faults when it comes to historical representation, the graphic novel offers a fascinating portrait of a singular individual and a pioneering work. It's also a paean to the striking natural diversity of the places Audubon visited. It's easy to forget the magnetism of the wild birds and landscapes of the US. *Audubon* demonstrates how it can take authors and artists not born in this country to reignite an appreciation of what it contains.

The book takes on a certain poignancy when one considers that several of the birds Audubon painted during his lifetime have since gone extinct, and half of North American bird species are threatened by climate change. For all its starry-eyed prettiness, then, a book like *Audubon* is a vital reminder of what's at stake. ■

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