



The Ravenmaster: My Life with the Ravens at the Tower of London

Christopher Skaife

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The first behind-the-scenes account of life with the legendary ravens at the world's eeriest monument

The ravens at the Tower of London are of mighty importance: rumor has it that if a raven from the Tower should ever leave, the city will fall.

The title of Ravenmaster, therefore, is a serious title indeed, and after decades of serving the Queen, Yeoman Warder Christopher Skaife took on the added responsibility of caring for the infamous ravens. In *The Ravenmaster*, he lets us in on his life as he feeds his birds raw meat and biscuits soaked in blood, buys their food at Smithfield Market, and ensures that these unusual, misunderstood, and utterly brilliant corvids are healthy, happy, and ready to captivate the four million tourists who flock to the Tower every year.

A rewarding, intimate, and inspiring partnership has developed between the ravens and their charismatic and charming human, the Ravenmaster, who shares the folklore, history, and superstitions surrounding the ravens and the Tower. Shining a light on the behavior of the birds, their pecking order and social structure, and the tricks they play on us, Skaife shows who the Tower's true guardians really are?and the result is a compelling and irreverent narrative that will surprise and enchant.

The Ravenmaster: My Life with the Ravens at the Tower of London Details

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From Reader Review The Ravenmaster: My Life with the Ravens at the Tower of London for online ebook

Nostalgia Reader says

4.5 stars.

This will be a very brief review, not for lack of interest in the book, but rather because it was relatively short itself.

Skaife is a delightful storyteller, and this memoir weaves the perfect mixture of facts about caring for the ravens at the Tower, personal history, and Tower factoids. I never felt like the raven-memoir aspect of it was ever sacrificed for the personal history aspect. Skaife frames the book around his daily routine with the birds, with chapters veering off to talk about the history of the ravens, their species as a whole, a variety of reminisces about his personal history and how he got to work at the Tower, and, of course, the routine itself of caring for the ravens. All around it was both informative and amusing read. I had wished it was a bit longer, or more substantial in some aspects, but it also worked perfect as a short book due to the wide variety of topics covered.

Highly recommended for anyone who is interested in the Tower of London or ravens!

Thank you to NetGalley for providing me with a free copy to review!

(Cross posted on my blog.)

Billie says

Narrated by the author, with whom I now want to hang out and have a drink.

Wendy says

I have been a fan of ravens and crows my entire life. When I met the ravens at the Tower I fell in love. Ordering this book was a no-brainer! WAITING FOR IT TO GET ACROSS THE POND was a bummer. All the UK reviews on social media just reminded me how far away I am. Once it was in my hands I devoured it. Great read. Charming, thoughtful and absolutely enjoyable.

Raven says

Grab yourself a cuppa, perhaps a couple of chocolate biscuits, and relax into the company of The Ravenmaster, Mr Christopher Skaife. I absolutely loved the conversational feel of this fascinating and very enjoyable biography of Skaife's careers past and present, and the genuine passion and enthusiasm he has for the headstrong, noble and beautiful ravens in his care.

Skaife's storytelling, both serious and humorous is filled with information, anecdotes and moments of hilarity, all with the easy charm that I suspect that The Ravenmaster employs in his daily life with the, at times, testing general public. With a real sense of wonder and fascination for the raven, and references to the most interesting works about them, the evolution of his employment, and his unique workplace, this is a highly enjoyable and entertaining read. Recommended.

Melise says

I enjoyed reading this book quite a bit. It is a combination autobiography and history describing the life of the Yeoman Warder who is in charge of caring for the ravens that live at the Tower of London. He tells anecdotes about working with the birds, explains why they live at the Tower, the procedures that are used for caring for these animals and provides a lot of information about the raven itself.

As an American born and raised in Southern California, I have never had the opportunity to tour the Tower of London, but have visited Disneyland numerous times. I have often thought that being a tour guide for the Jungle Ride at Disneyland must be one of the best jobs at the park, as the tour guides consistently make silly jokes and bad puns and seem to be enjoying themselves immensely. Based upon Skaife's book, I am guessing that being a Yeoman Warder at the Tower of London is a very similar position. His descriptions of many of his and his coworkers' interactions with the public reminded me of the type of humor I have heard on the Jungle Ride. This good-natured humor permeates the entire book, and made it an overall pleasant reading experience.

One of the unexpected pleasures that arose out of reading this book was his description of the ravens themselves, which are much more intelligent than I ever knew. I was reading this book on my iPad, and frequently found myself clicking away from the book to listen to recordings of raven vocalizations, and videos of ravens flying, or using tools or solving complex problems. It was a fascinating introduction to a subject that I knew nothing about previously, and I am looking forward to doing more research about ravens and their behavior.

All in all, this was a quick and enjoyable read that I definitely recommend.

I received an advanced reading copy from Farrar, Straus and Giroux via NetGalley. Thanks!

Julia Simpson-Urrutia says

Stepping back into history is fun, but ravenmasters do not really seem to go that far back, according to Skaife's comment that he is but the sixth appointed ravenmaster at the Tower of London. I recommend this very well written book for lovers of London history because tourists who step into the Tower estate will find themselves so crowded by other tourists that they may not get as many stories as they wish--and certainly not from the ravenmaster. I liked reading about the ravens and Skaife's frank admiration of them. We are beholden to bird lovers and rescuers everywhere. I was enchanted by this book! #The Ravenmaster and its cover art. #NetGalley.

Diane S ? says

I found every aspect of this book incredibly well done. From the personal tone it is written in, to all the interesting information it imparts. We get to know the Ravenmaster, his time in the military, and what it takes to get this position in the tower. We learn about the Ravens, not only the stories that surround their being at the tower, but an up close look at their habitats, and even their personalities. One of their favorite snacks are dog bones soaked in blood. Well, they are carnivores, after all.

All the superstitions associated with Ravens, from the heralders of death, to one of my favorite parts, the connection between the esteemed Charles Dickens and his use of Ravens in his novels. The most famous being the Raven Grip in Barnsby Rudge. As the author notes, "I may have a rather partial view, but to my mind Dickens counts as a genius not because of his prolific output, nor because of his famous public performances and his great public works, but because he gets every single detail about Ravens right!"

Of course the famous inhabitants of the Tower, and stories associated with them and the tower itself are included. In fact, for a book without a large number of pages, there is much information and entertainment to be found. I enjoyed every moment of my reading experience, but then again this is the season for the macabre.

Beth says

Such an enjoyable book to read! This will be the perfect gift for someone who enjoys reading, but it's hard to figure out what they like. It's light, fun, and easy, with some history, some fascinating information about the ravens, and a few lovely pictures. Honestly, that's the only reason I didn't give it 5 stars - I truly wish there were more pictures. I've seen some of the gorgeous ones on Twitter, and was hoping for more. However, his Twitter account is pretty neat, so it's well worth checking out in tandem with the book!

Bettie? says

Joyce says

Anyone who, like me, enjoys books about "stuff," fascinating, trivia-filled explorations of almost anything, won't want to pass this up. Despite having lived in London, I honestly had no knowledge of the Ravens at the Tower of London and of the legend that warns that if the ravens disappear, the tower will fall and "great harm" will befall the kingdom. Through Skaife's vast knowledge, obvious affection for his avian charges, and enthusiasm for his subject, all our questions are answered--and we learn more than we ever expected. He's a natural storyteller, and, in addition to his responsibilities caring for the ravens, he conducts tours of the Tower complex. All that information is related here--ornithology, history, the individual ravens and their personalities, the history of the tower with its murderous past and the possibility of ghosts--in the jaunty style

of a natural storyteller. Short, anecdotal chapters speed the pace, and Skaife's enthusiasm for all his discusses is infectious. Two incentives for listening to the audio: Skaife reads it so listeners experience his animated performance and an interview with the author concludes the audio. Totally diverting.

Barbara says

A wonderful story narrated by the author. Skaife convinces readers that ravens are indeed fascinating. Like the best of books that are memoirs centered on people and animals, the readers will come to respect and even love these creatures. Skaife is no nonsense, down-to-earth, but authoritative. Before his job at the Tower of London, he was in the British Army and credits that experience with developing his love of routine, order, and not least of all, love of his country. He served in Northern Ireland and provides a brief view of what the very young often teenaged soldiers felt and experienced in that environment. I visited the Tower in 1993 in early morning, the best time to avoid the overwhelming crowds, and the ravens were the highlight (not the Crown Jewels). Even if you haven't been there, read this book!

Montzalee Wittmann says

Ravenmaster

by Christopher Skaife

This is an audible book I requested and the review is voluntary.

This is one of the best non-fiction books I have read this year. I enjoyed everything about this book! The book is laid out wonderfully simple and efficiently. This is a book about taking care of the 6-7 ravens at the tower of London! The author is the Ravenmaster. It is his job to keep the ravens safe and healthy and at the tower. This sounds simple but as he tells it, there is a lot to this job and it is also fascinating! I would love to be an assistant!

He tells the history of the tower, of the job, we meet each raven and their personalities, odd things the ravens have done, odd things people have done (including the assists and Ravenmaster), ghosts, life in the tower, and so much more! Each chapter is truly amazing! I was spellbound! I really think he has an awesome job because I love ravens! He also discusses famous visitors, death of some ravens, what they do then, and more. I imagine the physical book might have pictures but I googled it.

The author's love for these birds, his job, his humor, intelligence, and pride in his country really shines through! I giggled a lot while listening to this! He also narrated the book which was wonderful to hear it from the Ravenmaster himself!

I recommend this book to everyone!!!

Trish says

Some might have already seen my review for this book.

As mentioned before, this edition here is actually the one I wanted because the cover is much more beautiful, showing raven Merlina as well as the Ravenmaster and the Tower, hinting at the history theme that also permeates this great story along with the anecdotes about Christopher Skaife's life and his many adventures with the ravens.

Thus, although I already have the red UK edition, I had to have this one as well. When it finally arrived today, I discovered that the cover wasn't the only thing different about this! The US/CA version also features colour photographs unlike the UK's b/w ones and there are more photographs overall. Oh, and there's a historical map of the Tower in the front and back (you know you can always get me with maps).

(Yes, this is a group photo with Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II.)

(The bottom one is quite important for three reasons. (view spoiler))

So while I love my red edition because I bought it in London and the author signed it (for the full adventure, read my original review linked to above), this one is a little bit special in its own way and I'd actually encourage readers to get this one for the extra images.

For anyone interested: there is not just a visual difference between the two Yeoman Warder uniforms. Christopher Skaife did explain it, making him wearing "the other one" in the picture shown above as well as on the cover even more hilarious. *lol*

Trish says

I've been a fan of ravens for a long time and always detested their bad reputation thanks to silly old superstitions that seem to mostly derive from their physical appearance and the fact that they are omnivores. Especially the latter seems only yet another sign of their extreme intelligence because all of us who've paid attention in biology know that highly specialized (picky) animals are much more likely to die out (yes, I'm also talking about you, sabre-toothed tigers).

It all began with Sir David Attenborough, as is often the case. Yes, I adore the man and always will. He is the prime example of a human not caring about looks but ability and he was the one telling me (through one of his BBC programmes) about the intelligence tests (Kerplunk games) for ravens that most of them seem to ace every time.

Then, some time ago, I somehow heard about the Ravenmaster on Twitter. I didn't know anything about the man or his job but the tweet had the picture of a gorgeous raven so I clicked and scrolled - and became addicted to the man's updates. Through his photographs and little videos I got to share his enthusiasm and see some of the quirky birds almost every day.

My plan had been to see London eventually, the plans having been thwarted by a lack of money for a long time, and those plans only got invigorated by the prospect of meeting these special corvids personally when visiting the historic site! And this year my dream finally came true. I had the money and didn't care that I'd had to go on vacation on my own, I could do this! Thus, I booked tickets and made plans and got really excited.

Imagine my delight, therefore, when I heard that the man was going to publish a book about his life at the Tower and the ravens there! So when I was in London this past week, I had to get a copy before making my way to the Tower and I did. It wasn't the edition I had originally wanted but I didn't care (unusual for me).

Packed and ready to go, I got there early and went on one of the apparently famous Yeoman Warder tours (like an idiot I hadn't known much about the Tower in advance except for some juicy historical bits).

Following the sarcastic "elderly and rude" (his words) Yeoman Warder and listening to his take on the history of the fortress was delightful. Afterwards, I met a raven posing for tourists when exiting the exhibition of the crown jewels. I took some pictures, moved on. After walking through yet another exhibition (the Fusiliers Museum), I made my way to the raven enclosure, heart set on meeting the Ravenmaster and getting my book signed. And he was there! I only noticed by a complete coincidence despite his uniform. I chatted him up and ...

However, like a complete idiot, despite him being so nice and friendly and us chatting for a few solid minutes about everything from the ravens themselves to our shared admiration for Sir David Attenborough, I forgot to ask for a feather - because it is mentioned in the book that the Ravenmaster sometimes has some that he hands out. *doh*

He had to leave, however, because despite it being his day off, he had to watch some students who were researching and filming the ravens' behavioral patterns and talking to some journalists (I was lucky he was there at all)!

Thus, I made my way to yet more interesting sights around the Tower (there is no shortage of those), tried kicking myself for not having remembered to ask about the feather, kept watching the birds and even entered the gift shop where I got a cute raven pin and pencil with a raven on top. I was contemplating my chances of finding him again when I noticed him while walking the battlements and made a split-second decision to stalk the poor man. So I descended the stairs, keeping an eye on the Ravenmaster and the reporters filming him, waited in front of the enclosure where Poppy (youngest member of the raven staff) promptly entertained me when a student entered her enclosure and tried to take one of her toys away (yes, pure Schadenfreude, but the woman deserved it - she wanted to take a toy away!), which prompted the cheeky bird to show her who the boss was and chasing her out. Yes, I chuckled, I may have even laughed loudly (no, I'm not sorry) because even the bird looked at me. BWAHAHAHAHAHA!

The Ravenmaster then walked down and out of the enclosure with the journalists, I followed (yes, I know, but I wanted a feather!), waited until the journalists had said goodbye for what must have been the fourth time - and then I made my move! If you ever read this, Ravenmaster, I really am sorry. *lol*

Anyway, I found the courage to chat him up again, inquired about the feather and behold, I didn't get one but TWO!!!

But that isn't the end of this glorious tale, nope. I was so incredibly happy after leaving the food preparation rooms where he kept dead chicks and the afore-mentioned feathers that I had to sit down. I opted for one of the benches around White Tower, hoping for a good shot of one of the ravens. And suddenly there was Poppy! She was walking from left to right and left again behind my bench, probably trying to scare me so I'd drop some food. Alas, I had deliberately nothing on me. Instead, I turned around, facing her and started talking to her. Yes, I talk to animals, I don't care what you think about that. But here is the amazing thing: she cocked her head, hopped onto the litter bin and from there onto my bench next to me AND STARTING CHATTING BACK (no idea what else to call it)!!! She came so close, I could have easily stroked her feathers but of course I didn't. I wasn't scared or anything, I just figured she wouldn't like that (imagine if even only a quarter of all tourists tried that, how annoyed she would have to be). So I sat there, eyeing her, talking, listening to her sounds. Then I took the picture below (yes, she was definitely posing when she wasn't cleaning her beak) and then she took off.

Nothing - and I mean NOTHING - could compare to that during my vacation. I wasn't walking, I was floating for the rest of the day.

Tonight, I finally finished this compelling, funny and insightful book that gave me historical information as much as some great insight into the Ravenmaster's military career and the mischief of these extraordinary birds. I am no longer surprised that they actually are working the crowds (two of them did after my encounter with Poppy, first performing for one side, then turning around and doing the routine on the other, it was glorious to watch).

From the bottom of my heart: THANK YOU, Ravenmaster, for a book that isn't only entertaining (though it definitely is) but also moving and THANK YOU for spending some of your precious (free) time with this fan and being so generous to her.

And THANK YOU, Poppy, for not doing to me what you did to that female student (she totally deserved it).
;)

P.S.: This hardcover edition has nearly 300 pages, by the way, not only 208 as Goodreads claims.

K.J. Charles says

I vividly remember the day of Brexit. Nobody knew what the hell was going on and the pound fell off a cliff and we saw the leading Brexiteers looking nauseous and terrified as they realised their actions had catastrophic consequences, and the Prime Minister's resignation only made it to #3 on the news agenda. It was chaotic and terrifying in the days when that wasn't standard practice. I was on Twitter of course, and there I saw a tweet from the Ravenmaster with a picture of the Tower ravens that read, simply, "We are still here."

I welled up. It meant a lot.

This is a marvellous book about a bizarre job. Mr Skaife is a Yeoman Warder and in charge of the Tower ravens because if they ever leave the Tower, the country will fall. He actually shows that to be a relatively recent myth, but that doesn't make it any less true IMO: it's deeply embedded in the national consciousness and every story has to start somewhere.

This is very much a book of stories, one of those reads that feels like you're in the pub with a really interesting bloke. Chatty, discursive, a lot about the life that brought him to this point, and loads about the ravens he adores. You learn about raven flight feathers and bird distribution globally and raven myths and Army drumming and what it was like to be on Army duty in South Armagh or Belize and how the Warders cope with the visiting public (taking the mickey, basically), and it's all just a really interesting slice of human life. I'm now desperate to go to the Tower again, tourist trap that it is, just to check out the birds. A lovely book.
