

"I love this book, which is like a 21st century (Scottish, female) Gilbert White. Its sharpness of looking, and directness of thought, will stay with me for a long time." Andrew Marr

FINDINGS

KATHLEEN JAMIE



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Kathleen Jamie

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It's surprising what you can find by simply stepping out to look. Kathleen Jamie, award winning poet, has an eye and an ease with the nature and landscapes of Scotland as well as an incisive sense of our domestic realities. In *Findings* she draws together these themes to describe travels like no other contemporary writer. Whether she is following the call of a peregrine in the hills above her home in Fife, sailing into a dark winter solstice on the Orkney islands, or pacing around the carcass of a whale on a rain-swept Hebridean beach, she creates a subtle and modern narrative, peculiarly alive to her connections and surroundings.

Findings Details

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From Reader Review Findings for online ebook

Jason says

"The water was Sheeny in the gloaming"

I love that line. This was a wonderful book, easily one of the best I have ever read.

I was expecting it to be good and all about nature, what I wasn't expecting was to be taken into the authors life, to experience all that she was going through, all the family issues. You really get to feel just how much she wants to escape from it all and be at peace with nature.

A couple of favourite parts in the book were scouring the remote Scottish island beaches for anything interesting that might have washed up... of course there had to be a road cone. Also watching the peregrines was very interesting and the fact that she found a copy of a book I have always wanted to read *The Peregrine* just makes me want a copy even more.

Looking forward to reading her next book called *sightlines*.

Blog review is here. <https://felcherman.wordpress.com/2018...>

Fiona says

Beautiful, poetic writing. A book to read when you're looking for inner peace.

Pat Morris-jones says

I have little interest in birds, or buildings details or anything else she describes usually. Not terribly liking of poetry. However she writes so beautifully. I can tell she is a poet. The language is so very....not sure of the word. It is one long narrative poem, short story collection and so on. Yet, it is none of these. No idea why only 4 star but I am being harsh I think.

Hugh says

I have been looking forward to reading this book since I read its equally brilliant sequel/companion piece *Sightlines* last year. Jamie brings a quiet poetic eye to her observations of both the natural world and modern humanity, making many intriguing connections.

She succeeds in making a beautiful and unified whole from essays on a very varied set of subjects, ranging from the nature of darkness, birdwatching, remote uninhabited Scottish islands, the view from Edinburgh's Calton Hill and a museum of surgical specimens, to name just a few, while making perceptive observations

on the connections with her own life.

Brian Robbins says

Writing on a par with Roger Deakin and Robert Macfarlane. Interweaves the personal experiences and anecdotes, with a wider world, largely the natural world, but goes beyond that too into history and metaphysics.

Macfarlane and Deakin are both masters of prose, she brings the poet's ability to hone in on specific images in very few words, and very well chosen words at that, to create very tangible scenes and scenery in very brief paragraphs.

The book is wonderfully readable and enjoyable. Some books you want to finish. A few books you don't want to finish, you still want more of it to look forward to. This definitely the latter.

MN says

I really tried with this, and did at least manage to get to the end - unlike on my last attempt. However, I still much prefer Annie Dillard.

There are some gems in the collection - sentences or phrases, but I quickly wearied of Jamie's tone. I think I'd have got on better if she had restricted herself to what she saw, rather than tell me what she thought about it and so what I was to think. Once she 'stepped in' so to speak, I became acutely aware of The Author, and was frankly irritated by her company.

Neil says

In just over 2 weeks, my wife and I will leave home to head, for the sixth time in as many years for a holiday on an island off the west coast of Scotland. We've been to Islay, Skye, Arran and Mull (twice) and this time we will take our courage in both hands and go further still into the Outer Hebrides.

Reading Findings has definitely heightened my excitement about this upcoming holiday. Much of the book is set in the Inner and Outer Hebrides and I suppose this might partly explain why I enjoyed reading the book so much.

It is also a book that spoke to me about the way I approach my life. I spend a lot of time outside searching for wildlife that I can photograph. It was great to read...

"This is what I want to learn: to notice, but not to analyse. To still the part of the brain that's yammering, 'My God, what's that? A stork, a crane, an ibis? - don't be silly, it's just a weird heron.' Sometimes we have to hush the frantic inner voice that says 'Don't be stupid,' and learn again to look, to listen.

Much of the book is an encouragement to notice things in the midst of normal life:

"Then the osprey was gone and I turned back to the dryer, looking for matching socks".

There are chapters about birds, a chapter about salmon, a chapter about the illness of the author's husband, a chapter about cetaceans. And more. In all of them, the author infuses a sense of wonder with a sense of the "normalness" of life.

As a bird watcher, I perhaps especially loved the chapters about birds. Last year on Mull, we took a day trip to Iona where we stood by a field for 2 hours because we could hear 2 corncrakes calling and we wanted to see them. Seeing these birds is notoriously difficult and we had to give up when it was time to leave to catch the ferry back to Mull. So when I read this, about a woman who also wanted to see a corncrake...

"Birdwatchers come especially - Sarah tells of an old lady who sat quiet and demure on this very viewing bench for an hour, two hours...then there was a whoop, and Sarah turned to see the old lady leaping around, punching the air like a footballer, just for a glimpse of an elusive brown bird."

...I was there, I could relate!

There is a chapter about a museum collection of body parts. As I read this, I could not help being reminded of both Flights and Sight. Perhaps this quotation will explain why to those who have also read these books:

"Several times, in his writings, he approached anatomy through metaphor striving for exactitude. 'The opened body is as a foreign country,' he wrote, 'Anatomy is as a harvest field'; 'Anatomy is as to medicine as sight is to the body.'"

A collection of meditations that manages to link history to our modern world and that manages to encourage us to look for the beauty and the detail around us.

A beautiful book.

Mark says

Reading poetry, I suppose, is a little like entering into a relationship with someone much more than in a novel or history or even, oddly in a biography or autobiography. In those prose works you encounter, to an extent, from a distance but in Poetry you encounter the person their opinions and feelings and sometimes even their innermost thoughts that maybe they are not even too sure or certain about. I know that when I write my own paltry stuff because I find I often reveal far more than I realized or certainly far more than I intended.

Anytime I take down a volume of poetry I know that I am likely to encounter some poems which move me unutterably and others which leave me cold. Now again, using the image of a relationship, I realize that this, normally, is far more about me and not the writer, it is something about my state of mind at that time or my mood or my levels of concentration and that is why poetry in my experience, needs dipping into over extended periods of time rather than one hefty digesting. Kathleen Jamie's work, though prose, reads like a poem and is a series of short essays or meditations on her journeying around her world. Some are wonderfully evocative of her love of the natural world and her intimate encounters with things that "set her heart on fire" and I captured a sense of this love, this deep appreciation of the world around her but, as with

any poetic musing, one or two fell dismally flat for me. That is my point however, maybe I needed to approach this book more like poetry than prose. The two essays 'Surgeon's hall' and 'Skylines' were very disappointing but maybe that was because i had been so impressed and moved by the others. perhaps if i read them in a few weeks or months they will wow me in the same way as others of the collection did.

She is a poet and she cannot write without imagery and analogies, the pages are littered with them; On the very first page she has a beautifully atmospheric image

'It was a weakling light, stealing into the world like a thief through a window someone forgot to close'

and almost every other page bestows a little dewdrop to glisten and sparkle on the narrative's surface.

Descriptions of weather and wind and cloud are everywhere. 'smir of cloud' (i assumed this was a scottish word for 'smear' but am open to be corrected), 'scraps of rainbow', 'squalls like grey wings', 'the evening sky, winnowed by the wind, was whitish blue'.

She also has a great turn of phrase, using humour in her images.

'Like three elegant women conversing at a cocktail party are the Standing Stones of Stenness',

Blossoms issuing out on to the trees are 'like a dancehall filling on a Saturday night',

'We must have looked less like monks than cheapskate Magi, the three of us in waterproofs, one behind the other, bearing these peculiar things',

'the kind of bird who'd want to be excused games'....I loved this bizarre anthropomorphism,

'the snow melt draining down from the higher hills dither and slouch and form sullen pools, like teenagers at a bus stop',

'birds cruising over the rooftops like pieces flaked off from the city's skin'

and then every now and again a beautiful piece of thinking which leaves you wondering and revolving in thought;

'the cobwebs made me think of ears, or those satellite dishes attuned to every different nuance of the distant universe'

A really lovely book nad one I will definitely look through again and hope that when i encounter those two other chapters next time I am more ready for them, more, to finish back where I started, up for it.

Claire McAlpine says

One of my favourite nature writers, her poetry and her essays are very comforting to settle into and her subtle connections between the world of humans and nature, often as elusive as a random bird or moth sighting itself.

Read my full review here at [Word by Word](#).

Paul says

There is something about the way that Jamie writes that captivates and immerses you in the subject that she writes about.

This book is no exception to that.

The subject, or short essays, that are in this book are not exclusively about the natural world, but most are. As she writes on the matter at hand, I feel her passion and her strengths, her weakness and doubts, and all the time I am amazed by the attention to detail that she has in her prose. It doesn't seem to make any difference whether she is writing about peregrines or her husband's fever, you feel alongside, seeing the things that she has seen, feeling the wind and smelling the sea.

This is effortless, exquisite reading.

Ali says

As many regular readers of my blog may have noticed, I don't read as much non-fiction as I often feel I should. I tend therefore to be a little picky about what non-fiction books I do read. Having seen several reviews of Kathleen Jamie's volumes of essays this has been on the horizon of books I must read for a little while. Finding myself in the mood for something a little different I downloaded it to my kindle just the other day deciding to read it straight away. Now that is the wonderful thing about e-readers isn't it? Instant gratification.

Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie's stunning collection of essays, focus on the natural world. With lyrical prose and acute but sensitive observations – Jamie beautifully evokes all aspects of the Scottish landscape. There is a wonderful calmness to Kathleen Jamie's writing which I instantly connected with, her imagery is beguiling and strangely memorable, as if one really has seen it oneself.

In the essay which opens this collection, it is mid-winter, and amid the preparations for Christmas, Kathleen Jamie ruminates on the symbolism of lightness and darkness.

"We couldn't see the real dark for the metaphorical dark. Because of the metaphorical dark, the death-dark, we were constantly concerned to banish the natural dark."

From her kitchen window Jamie watches a peregrine, listening to it call to its mate, conspiring with a local garage mechanic to watch the peregrines through his hidden telescope. In 'The Braan Salmon', Jamie presents us with the haunting image of an awe inspiring Salmon run, where the Salmon are deliberately prevented from following their instinctive route back to where they were born. There are many such images, images that will stay with me for some time, a dead minke whale on the beach, a boat surrounded by dolphin, the view of the Edinburgh skyline from Calton Hill. For me however the most enduring image is that of the corncrake. The corncrake is a small rare Scottish bird, that I am now firmly in love with. Crex-Crex (the call of the corncrake) my favourite of the essays and one I can see myself returning to. It starts with a description of that well known painting; the Haywain by Constable.

"The point is, when Constable packed up his easel at the end of that summer's day, what he would have heard as he walked home through the fields – indeed, what we could hear if we could step into his painting – would be the call of the corncrake. A corncrake is a brown bird, a kind of rail, not ten inches tall, which prefers to remain unseen in tall damp grass. Its call – you'd hardly call it a song – is two joined notes, like a

rasping telephone. Crex-crex is the bird's Latin name, a perfect piece of onomatopoeia. Crex-crex it goes, crex-crex"

This book has brought my April reading to a very satisfactory close, and has certainly left me wanting to read Kathleen Jamie's second volume of essays Sightlines. I will hold off buying that one just for the moment – but I am certainly now looking forward to it.

sisterimapoet says

I loved this. Each and every part of it. I liked how Jamie shared a little of her life, within the context of her engagement with the greater world around her. I like the way she looks at things, and thinks and feels. I like the way she writes. I found this book both comforting and greatly encouraging to my own life and writing. A big thumbs up!

Nikki McGee says

Beautifully observed and written, particularly the sections focused on the wildlife and scenery. I found myself looking up animals and birds as they were featured and I could feel myself walking and quietly observing with the author. As someone who is quite a solitary person who also enjoys just walking on my own, soaking up the world around me I loved certain essays.

However I did skip certain essays that were very focused in their family or Edinburgh, I think I prefer animals to people! Having said this the paragraphs describing a visit to an old people's home were particularly insightful.

A good relaxing almost meditative book for those so used to solitude.

Sibyl says

Finding this book - in a charity shop, with a long train journey ahead - was a piece of serendipity.

It's hard to know quite why this series of essays and reflections is so enjoyable. The poet Kathleen Jamie describes her explorations of the natural world. Some pieces focus on the area round her home, others on her travels around remoter areas of Scotland. There are a couple of sections devoted to her discoveries of little-known parts of Edinburgh.

Maybe it's the unflashy beauty of her measured prose, its mixture of calmness and curiosity. Kathleen Jamie enabled me to see and she made me think. Her writing has a meditative quality, but it's honest - there's no false straining towards spirituality. She is unsentimental about Nature too, always acknowledging the way that human beings have put their mark on even the most 'unspoiled' landscape. Our own emotions - and situation - will always influence what we observe.

Each piece had the clarity - and mystery - of a successful poem.

Antonomasia says

I read a little of this book of nature essays ten years ago, not long after it was released (and highly praised). I was underwhelmed. Yet the same characteristics I wasn't keen on then are what I enjoyed now.

In the intervening decade, a strand of mystically, historically inclined nature writing has become popular. My theory (as I've mentioned already to some friends) is that many of these authors, in their thirties and forties, fellow late Gen-X'ers, grew up on series I also loved, for example, *The Dark Is Rising* and *Robin of Sherwood* and as a result something a bit pagan is entwined with the way we appreciate nature. It used to feel like it was mostly in my head, there were only a handful of people I'd ever spoken to who 'got' it; then a few authors started writing that way; and the next thing you know, you can't browse books without falling over and bruising yourself on atavistic verbal celebrations of the countryside. *Findings* is like wholemeal bread - all the easier to appreciate when indulgences have become so frequent as to get boring, but it would be a grey world if that was all one experienced.

Findings is rooted in its present; ferries and oil rigs and plastic rubbish on the seashore are as much part of the vista as the older landscapes. (It never felt aesthetically wrong to read this as an ebook, as it might with some texts.) The author visits Maes Howe, and there are surveyors inside with technical equipment; she also can't stay for the solstice as she has to be home to look after the kids that day. This is an experience of nature frequently bound by practicalities; there are no months'-long escapist trips (or the impression of them) to far flung wildernesses, or experiences of landscape that feel as if one could easily stumble back in time hundreds or thousands of years.

Between the laundry and the fetching kids from school, that's how birds enter my life. I listen. During a lull in the traffic: oyster-catchers; in the school-playground, sparrows. And the natural world is a solace, to some extent in the background, when her husband is seriously ill for a couple of weeks, and when she has to talk to her grandmother about going into a home.

As I started this book again, I recalled something - which my Scottish friends may take issue with. A cumulative personal feeling and experience, picked up from people in different places is that this kind of nature mysticism, and a certain associated fanciful extravagance is rather English, there being far more sympathy for it in the southern half of England in particular. Whilst the average Scot, albeit not necessarily Calvinist in the religious sense about such things, would typically find them silly, superfluous and perhaps a little suspicious if actually articulated (cf. the writing of Robert MacFarlane* compared with this book, an Englishman despite the name). The best response you'd get would be that person's version of 'that's nice dear', they wouldn't take the conversational ball and run with it. Kathleen Jamie's Scotland feels Nordic and sensible; the obverse of that is, perhaps inevitably, a touch of Jante Law. Then there's the quality of Belle & Sebastian and other Scottish indie commonly called 'fey': if you must be weird and artsy, you should be a bit shy and apologetic about it - not flamboyant (unless of course you're drunk).

I didn't expect Jamie, later in the book, to write a scene illustrating the contrast I perceive.

Nonetheless, I feel robbed – denied one of the sounds of summer, which all our forebears would have known, that irksome little crex-crex. Why conserve them, other than it being our moral duty to another life form on this earth? If there is no 'clam'rin craik', no 'noisy one of the rushes', it betokens something out of kilter with the larger ecosystem on which ultimately, in mysterious as-yet-undiscovered ways, we all depend. That's what the ecologists and scientists will tell you. But there are things which cannot be said – not by

scientists, anyway. Another person arrives at the viewing bench, not an old lady but a man in young middle age, a holiday-maker. We fall into conversation – he obviously knows his stuff about birds. He has a young family with him on the island and, while they're on the beach, he has slunk off for an hour in the hope of spotting a corncrake. So here he is, an Englishman of higher education with a professional job, a family, a cagoule and good binoculars.

'Can I ask why you like them? Corncrakes I mean.'

'Well,' he said. 'They're like... little gods of the field, aren't they?'

I could have punched the air. If corncrakes are rare, animism is rarer still. Anyone can clear his throat and talk about biodiversity, but 'Corncrakes... little gods of the field' will not get you published in ornithologists' journals. That's how I picture them now, however: standing chins up, open-beaked, like votive statues hidden in the grass.

I get the feeling she would never have allowed herself to imagine it of her own accord.

On a couple of other occasions she reprimands herself for some poetic ideas - but she's a poet. (e.g. In a museum of dead things: *In this place of silence and slow time, it's as though [they] hug each other and look happily forever up - on the bright linnets and wrens. Which, I remind myself through tears, is ridiculous.*) If even a poet isn't supposed to imagine such things, who on earth is, in her stringently realist world-view?

Most of the essays are about rural landscapes, but two are about Edinburgh. One is about rooftop features of notable buildings in the city, the other a visit to a museum collection of 18th and 19th century medical specimens: organs, bodies and the like. The latter is something I'd never have chosen to read about, but I'm not so soft I'd need to leave a gap in the book. I wasn't squeamish about the description of a dead beached whale on an uninhabited island in an earlier essay. It's not the purely physical I mind, but the introduction of human authoritarian behaviour into the equation alongside the physically repulsive must be what leads me to I find the account of these specimens nauseating and angering. I very much liked the way Jamie tried to balance her instinctive felt suspicion of the character of the old specimen and body collectors with attempts to understand the different mores of the time and the stage science was at. (Professional writers are so much better at that sort of thing than the average GR reviewer...) Although given that empathy is now said to be considered far more important in medical training - and a strong stomach for witnessing physical ills doesn't necessarily preclude caring about individuals' experiences - I must disagree with her final point in that piece in which she agrees with a C19th quote about doctors' acquired lack of pity being useful for humanity as a whole.

The downside of Jamie's love of the quotidian is that the writing could be more spectacular too; its attention to detail is excellent but it can lack the intensity some would expect from a poet. However, *Findings* would be ideal for those who find Macfarlane's books overly literary, elitist, and dreamy - or who feel that one can sometimes have too much of a good thing as far as romantic nature writing is concerned.

* My own conclusion, but whilst writing this I found an LRB review - there's a quote from the paywalled text in this blog post - indicating that at one point Jamie also considered herself a different sort of writer from MacFarlane.
