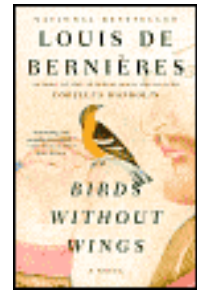




THE ATS BOOK CLUB

BIRDS WITHOUT WINGS Louis de Bernières



About the book¹

Birds Without Wings (Vintage International, 2004) begins in the early 1900s in an idyllic town in South West Anatolia during the declining years of the Ottoman Empire. It traces the fortunes of one small community in which Christian and Muslim lives and traditions have co-existed peacefully over the centuries, and in which friendship, even love, can transcend religious differences.

When war is declared and the outside world intrudes, religion and nationalism lead to forced marches and massacres and hunger grips the town. The Turkish Christians are removed to Greece whilst Greek Muslims are sent to Turkey in their place and the once peaceful fabric of life in the town is forever destroyed.

Birds Without Wings is epic in scale. It has at its centre the great themes of love, war, prejudice, mercy and courage. For the greatness of man is that he aspires to the heavens, his tragedy is that he is a bird with no wings and must remain forever bound to the earth, staring at the beauty of the stars.

About the author

Louis de Bernières was born in London in 1954. After graduating from the Victoria University of Manchester, he took a postgraduate certificate of Education at Leicester Polytechnic and obtained his MA at the University of London.

Before writing full-time, he held many varied jobs including teaching English in Colombia, an experience which determined the style and setting of his first three novels, *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* (Commonwealth Writers Prize, Best First Book Eurasia Region, 1991), *Senor Vivo and the Coca Lord* (Commonwealth Writers Prize, Best Book Eurasia Region, 1992), and *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman*. South America Literature, particularly 'magic realism', heavily influenced all of these novels.

In 1993 he was selected as one of the twenty 'Best of Young British Novelists 2' promotion in *Granta* magazine. In 1994, *Captain Correlli's Mandolin* was published, winning the Commonwealth Writer's Prize Best Book. It was also shortlisted for the Sunday Express Book of the Year. It became a worldwide bestseller which was translated into eleven languages. The film adaptation was released in 2001 and the novel has also been adapted for the stage.

His play *Sunday Morning at the Centre of the World*, set in South-West London was broadcast on BBC radio 4 in 1999 and published in 2001. He is also a regular contributor of short stories to various newspapers and magazines.

¹ Book and author information, acclaim for the book, and the readers' guide are by the publisher, Random House, Inc.

Interview with Louis de Bernières The Observer, June 20, 2004

'One of the odd things about becoming a novelist was that I realized I was interested in violence. But I was conscious in *Birds Without Wings* of toning it all down. I never use violence to excite; my purpose is to renew the moral shock. I'm interested in where violence comes from and how perfectly decent people can be dragged into committing it...I wanted to do away entirely with goodies and baddies and only have people who were both.'
To read more: ["I know I'm not Tolstoy, but I try"](#)

Acclaim for the Book

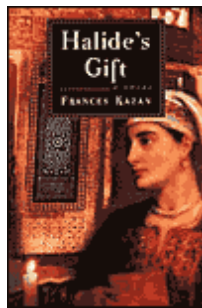
"Unites the chimerical poetry of Gabriel Garcia Marquez with the fine-grained domesticity of Trollope. . . . de Bernières . . . can move seamlessly from humor to poignancy and from easy charm to a searing anger." – *Financial Times*

"An absorbing read about a remote but captivating time. The Ottoman world's break-up is a rich, poignant story, and Mr. de Bernières is a good storyteller." – *The Economist*

"An absorbing epic. . . . De Bernières [is] adept at juxtaposing brutality with episodes of high comedy or romance." – *The New York Times Book Review*

About the Moderator

Frances Kazan is the author of *Goodnight, Little Sisters*, and *Halide's Gift*. She has an M.A. in Turkish studies and is a regular contributor to *Cornucopia*. A member of the American Turkish Society, she is also a member of the Society for Women Geographers and board president of The Kitchen, a performance center in Chelsea. Frances lives in New York.



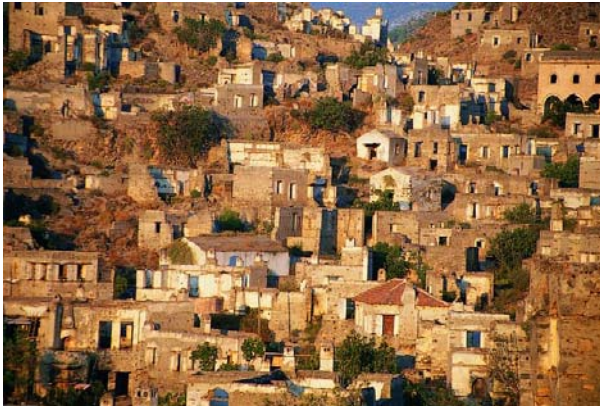
[Halide's Gift](#) (Random House, 2001) is set in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, in a society undergoing massive change. This richly detailed, atmospheric novel is loosely inspired by the life of the great Turkish writer and early feminist Halide Edib.

Mrs. Kazan's late husband **Elia Kazan**, born in Istanbul in 1909 to Greek parents, was a world-renowned director. His theater credits included directing *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Winner of two Academy Awards for best director for the movies *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and *On the Waterfront* (1954), he also received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Academy in 1999. Elia Kazan passed away in 2003 in New York.

Elia Kazan's acclaimed movie [America, America](#) (1963) is particularly relevant to readers of *Birds Without Wings*. The movie tells the story of two young men, an Armenian and a Greek, who leave their small town in Anatolia during the early 1900s for a better life in America. In 2001 the United States Library of Congress deemed the film "culturally significant" and selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry.

About the Setting

'I went to South-West Turkey and there's a ghost town there. It used to be a mixed community as described in the book more or less, and they obviously had a wonderful way of life, quite sophisticated. The town really started to die when the Christian population was deported. It was walking around that very special place that gave me the idea.' – Louis de Bernieres



www.fethiye.gov.tr/kayakoy_foto.asp

Eskibahce, the fictional town in *Birds Without Wings* is modeled after Kayakoy (formerly known as Levissi) - a ghost town in southwestern Turkey near the popular tourist destinations of Fethiye and Ölüdeniz. To read more, please see these articles:

["Chasing the Ghosts of a Forgotten War"](#)

The Observer, January 30, 2005

["The Idyllic Town that Time Forgot"](#)

Independent, June 11, 2005

About the times

The following New York Times articles on Turkish affairs in the early 1900s give a sense of the tremendous change that swept not only the town of Eskibahce, as depicted in the book, but also the whole country. If you wish to read more [NYT articles about the Ottoman Empire and Turkey between 1851 and 1938](#), a collection has been compiled by Turkish students at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

From Harem To College

Feb. 7, 1914

LONDON, Saturday, Feb.7- The Daily Telegraph's Constantinople correspondent says that the Ottoman Government has decided to admit women to the universities, where a special course of lectures on hygiene, domestic economy, and the rights of women will be delivered for their benefit.

In enlightened Ottoman circles the Government's new measure is regarded as an appropriate means for regenerating the world of Islam and placing it on a level with the civilization of the West.

Turks Rush To Buy Hats; Curb Applied To Profiteers

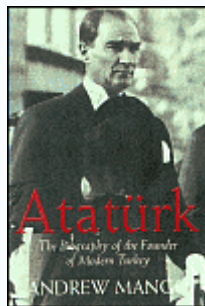
Sep. 18, 1925

CONSTANTINOPLE, Sept. 17- Following closely in the wake of President Mustapha Kemal's campaign against the ancient fez and kalpak and in favor of modern headgear, the hat profiteer has appeared in Turkey.

Fattening upon the demand created by the President's orders that the hat must be worn by officials and his speeches in favor of "the headdress of civilization," the hat dealers were so avaricious that the Prefect of Constantinople, Emine Bey, set a limit to their profits, 15 per cent, on ordinary hats and 25 per cent, on "fancy" ones.

In Angora the hat stores are completely sold out. In Constantinople new hat shops sprang up over night. They are crowded with men trying on hats for the first time in their lives and staring self-consciously in the mirrors.

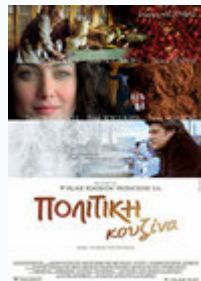
Related Resources



BOOK:

[Atatürk: The Biography of the founder of Modern Turkey, by Andrew Mango](#)

In this major new biography of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the first to appear in English based on Turkish sources, Andrew Mango strips away the myth, to show the complexities of one of the most visionary, influential, and enigmatic statesmen of the 20th Century.



MOVIE:

[A Touch of Spice](#) (2003)

The story is about a young Greek boy (Fanis) growing up in the Ottoman Istanbul, whose grandfather, a culinary philosopher and mentor, teaches him that both food and life require a little salt to give them flavor. *The movie will be shown at The Moon and Stars Project's 8th Annual NY Turkish Film Festival, October 20-28, 2006.*

Readers' Guide (adapted from Random House)

1. Why has Louis de Bernières chosen *Birds Without Wings* as his title? What actual and symbolic roles do birds play in the book? What does Karatavuk mean when he writes at the end of the novel, "We were birds without wings. . . . Because we cannot fly we are condemned to do things that do not agree with us" [p. 550–551]?

2. The setting of *Birds Without Wings* is an early twentieth-century Turkish village. How, despite its distant setting, does the novel mirror the contemporary world? In what way is the world of the novel vastly different from the world today?

3. In his prologue, Iskander the Potter says that he misses the Christians after they were removed from Eskibahçe: "Without them our life has less variety, and we are forgetting how to look at others and see ourselves" [p. 7]. Why does he feel that the presence of "others" allowed the villagers to see themselves? Why is the loss of variety so important? Why were so many different kinds of people able to live together in Eskibahçe so peacefully?
4. The novel vividly describes the nationalist fervor that swept the world in the early twentieth century: "Serbia for the Serbs, Bulgaria for the Bulgarians, Greece for the Greeks, Turks and Jews out!" [p.16] What causes these feelings? What are their ultimate consequences?
5. After Ayse and Polyxeni convince the reluctant Daskalos Leonidas to write a message in tears on the wings of a dove, which they hope will fly to Polyxeni's dead mother, Ayse exclaims, "It's incredible! A man with that much education, and he didn't even know about how to get a message to the dead" [p. 77]. What does this scene suggest about the gulf between traditional and modern ways of understanding the world?
6. On the way to Smyrna, Iskander prefaces his story by saying, "The thing about stories is that they are like bindweeds that have to wind round and round and creep all over the place before they get to the top of the pole" [p. 128]. Is what Iskander says here true of the novel itself? How does the story line "creep all over the place"?
7. Discuss Louis de Bernières' treatment of women in the novel. Does he sympathize with their plight in a patriarchal society? Does he feel for them in light of the restraints that their religions impose upon their lifestyles? You may wish to look at his portrayal of the key female characters in the novel such as Philothei, Leyla, Drosoul and Tamara Hanim.
8. *Birds Without Wings* has a freewheeling and fragmented narrative that passes swiftly from narrator to narrator. There is no central protagonist to guide us. How effective do you find this form of narrative? Does it add depth and meaning to the novel or would the story have worked better had there been fewer voices?
9. What is the significance of the relationships between Philothei and Ibrahim and between Karatavuk and Mehmetçik? Why are these young people so drawn to each other despite their religious differences?
10. Can *Birds Without Wings* be read as a cautionary tale for our own times? What does the novel say about the larger themes of love and war, revenge and forgiveness, both toward oneself and others?

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