

**VISITING WITH ANN CLEEVES,
BIRDWATCHING MYSTERY WRITER**

by Cassandra L. Oxley

Ann Cleeves is an English mystery writer with a specialty—birdwatching, or rather, twitching, as it is referred to in Great Britain. She invited me to her home in Northumberland, England, three hours by fast train north of London, to talk of mysteries and birdwatching. She and her husband Tim met my train and whisked me to their house. Along the way, in Newcastle-on-Tyne, they mentioned proudly the kittiwakes nesting in town, and the day seemed filled with promise. It was a fall day, a bit changeable. The leaves were still very green; the northeast had not been as affected by the summer drought as the rest of the country had been. The Cleeves' neighborhood was pleasant: full of houses and children and trees, with birds trilling all around.

Ann had to leave to pick up her daughters at school. "Tim would love to take you out to our local birding spot if you'd like—Holywell Pond. It's a short walk through a neighboring field." I jumped at the chance.

Tim Cleeves turned out to be an excellent guide, and he was definitely "twitchy," as Ann put it later over dinner. Restless for birds. Seems it was the time of year. Northern England really is not the place to be in the autumn months. Tim said a train to Penzance in Cornwall would lead to some serious birding on the southwest coast of England. Tim works for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and has been with them for several years. He does not get to birdwatch as he did when he and Ann first met; he has an office job now. His life is filled with paperwork, but after work and weekends he can take a drive out to the beach with his "bins" and his scope and hope to see something. He was sorry to see winter coming in; very soon he would not be able to do anything after work—it would be too dark. That sounded all too familiar.

As we stepped over the wire fence onto the public footpath and walked along the edge of the field, we could see a couple of birds that were quite near. Tim told me to focus on one of them—it was a Pied Wagtail. I was astonished. It was my first Pied. I had seen Yellow or Grey wagtails in Kent a few days earlier; I could not really be sure which. This bird was starkly white with a black face mask and wagging tail. Tim then said it was one of England's most common birds, and I felt a little silly. He said he could understand my excitement; perhaps it was like what he felt when he was in Canada and saw his first Blue Jay. He had marveled at it. He pointed out another bird—a Mistle Thrush. Amazing too, and common, oh so very common.

We headed toward the hide. Tim extracted a key from his jacket pocket,

unlocked the padlock, and went in, with me right behind him. It was surprisingly roomy. Tim opened the wooden window flaps, sat down on the bench, and had me do the same. There was Holywell Pond before us. He brought his binoculars up to his eyes, and I followed suit. We began to scan the ducks and gulls that were swimming rather serenely there as the sky began to darken.

"There might be a rarity among that flock of gulls—it's a good idea to look them over carefully, and perhaps among the Greylags too there might be something; you never know. It's the time of year when you might see something different." Tim was twitching intently to my right. Very quietly.

For a long time then we just watched. Time did not seem to matter. I was fascinated to hear everything Tim had to say and to see everything I could at Holywell Pond. The Greylag Geese were completely new to me, and the ducks too seemed very unfamiliar. Of course, I could not identify any of what I saw, but I was quite sure that Tim could.

He twitched. "That goose, in front of all the rest, there in the water. I'm not sure, but I think he's got different color legs than the rest, and his bill looks lighter. Do you see it there?" I focused. "What do you think?" I looked harder. I compared. All I could see were the bird's elbows. Elbows? But he was right about that bill. It was different. Orange yellow. It was no Greylag with that white patch on its face. "We'll have to wait until it comes out of the water. Then we'll be sure, at least, about the legs."

Tim took out a sketchbook and some charcoal pencils and began to carefully draw the goose he now had in his scope. We watched quietly, and the only sound was that of Tim's pencil scratching the paper. He invited me to look through the scope, and though I had some trouble, I did manage to get an image in focus—the goose in question. Still, I preferred my own bins, I confessed, as I handed him back the scope. Tim understood. "It takes a good while to get used to these things." It began to rain lightly, spattering the water's surface, as the mystery goose made its way ever so slowly toward the other geese and to the shore.

"The other geese don't much care for that one, do they?" They did seem hostile toward it, I had to admit. They were moving away slightly now and posturing in a way they had not done before. There were other birds to attend to, of course. A Greater Scaup with its broad bill. A Tufted Duck. A redshank. A pair of teals.

There was a jumble of noise suddenly at the door behind us. In burst a young girl, Tim and Ann's oldest daughter, Sarah, age nine. Tim had just been telling me his kids thought birding was deadly boring. Sarah eased into the seat beside me after introductions and looked out over the pond as if there was nothing new to see. "We're on to a rarity," said Tim softly. "Would you like to have a look, Sarah?" She carefully took the binoculars that he held out to her

and began to focus on the flock before us. "See the goose a bit away from the rest?"

"You mean the one closer to the water than the others? Yes." She handed the binocular back to her father. "We're thinking it might be a Greenland White-fronted Goose, a long way from home. Not positive, but pretty sure. Look at its legs. They're orange." In that bored way children have, she studied the goose once more and asked, "Is it a tick for me, Dad?"

Ann was at the door then to pick us up. Tim opted to stay on at the hide for a bit, and I joined Ann and her daughters on the path to home. She had dinner to prepare, children to get off to bed, and an inquiring guest to attend to.

Ann Cleeves writes at a table in the sparsely furnished living room, the same table we had just cleared from dinner; from the picture window in the room is a spectacular view of tall trees and green hills in the distance. Ann had mentioned in her letter to me that their garden list stands at eighty-eight species of birds, so there is plenty of birdwatching to be done from this window.

I asked Ann how she got started writing her mysteries and if the book that I had recently read, *A Bird in the Hand*, was her first. She said it was the first one she had finished. In the book a young birdwatcher is killed and found lying in a marsh in Norfolk. Before we are sure of the killer's identity, we are on the trail of a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, and the murder weapon—a smooth, cylindrical object—might very well have been a fellow birder's telescope.

Birdwatchers as subject matter first occurred to Ann when she was training to be a probation officer at Liverpool University. She had to do a sociological study of a subculture. Other people did studies of juvenile delinquents, drug addicts, the elderly, but Ann studied twitchers. According to Ann, the class was astounded that there was a group of people who would go to such lengths to see birds. "I wrote in sociological terms though, talking about the norms of the group and the language, the jargon that they used."

Ann gave up work when Sarah was born because they were living on Hilbre, a tidal island, which is where her second book, *Come Death and High Water*, is set. It was difficult with a baby to get out before the tides and get to work, so she started writing at home, using twitching as the theme for the book.

I asked if she had wanted to make fun of it a little, have some fun with it. "Yes," she laughed. "And show also how amazing it is."

In *A Bird in the Hand*, Ann introduces George Palmer-Jones, her detective. I was curious about his origins. Was he someone she knew or a composite of several people?

"He's quite similar to somebody I know: a retired professor who befriended us when we lived on Hilbre, the island where Tim was the warden. Prof was a great birder. If I couldn't get home—if the tides were wrong—I used to go and stay with them, him and his wife Dorothy. She was quite like Molly except she

was a scientist and was always wearing a lab coat. She was retired and very, very kind." Molly is George Palmer-Jones' wife in the series and a calm voice in often stormy situations. Ann said she identified with Molly quite a bit.

"Do you ask Tim about the rare birds that turn up in your books?"

"Oh yes. I think it's important to get the details right, because birdwatchers are going to read it. You'll spoil the whole credibility if you get any details wrong. Tim is a very respected twitcher, now he's gone respectable working for the RSPB. There are very keen birdwatchers in Britain, and mostly they know him."

"How do you actually set about writing your mystery? Do you write notes for months and months?"

"No, I think about it without writing anything down. I usually take a month or six weeks off between books. I take time thinking out the next book—where it will be set. It is really important where it's going to be set, especially with the birdwatching ones, because they're quite thematic. For instance, with the first one about twitching and with *Come Death and High Water*, which is about a bird observatory on a small island, the setting was brilliant. Hilbre was eleven acres off a peninsula in an estuary—tiny, and Tim and I would be the residents there. When the tide comes in, only those people who are on the island could have done the murder. It was ideal for a traditional detective story. I was able to use all the atmosphere there. We didn't have electricity, so we had to use lamps and candles. It was just right for traditional detective fiction."

"Did you get scared living there?"

"If it was really stormy, it could be quite scary—really dramatic westerly gales. And the hide—the sea-watching hide—was right at the end of the island at the old lifeboat house that was built there. At really high tides it would actually get cut off from the rest of the island. That was pretty scary. Sometimes you would get stuck there and have to stay for hours till the tide went out. It was quite frightening. We didn't have any main electricity or any main water, so in a gale like that, salt water would be blown onto the roof, and we collected drinking water in tubs on the side of the roof. We'd have salty tea for weeks afterwards—couldn't get the salt out of the water."

"Sounds terrible."

"Yes, but it was fun."

"So then you have the setting. . . ."

"Next, I know who the victim is. And I know more or less who the people are before I start writing. Usually I know who's done it. Sometimes that changes in the writing, but usually I do know."

"Do you sketch out the victim in great detail? Do you find you know the victim well?"

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English Peregrines being sold to Europe, to Germany, and then being sold into the Middle East, getting high prices. The Arabs really like European Peregrines. That provides us with a ready-made plot."

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"Oh yes. He's been asked to trace a teenager who has gone missing. They find out he's going to be on this pelagic trip, and he's the young man who has been killed."

"Aren't you originally from near Cornwall? Do your parents live there?"

"They did, yes. Now they live just down the coast. But yes, that is where I was raised, where I feel quite comfortable. And Tim is from Bristol, which is also quite close."

Ann studied English at the University of Sussex but did not much like it there. She took a job on Fair Isle, which was more to her liking. Here a lifelong love affair with islands and island living began, and Ann had her first introduction to birders. As a cook at the observatory on Fair Isle, she discovered that birders will eat anything as long as there is a lot of it. Later, while living on Hilbre, she continued her studies for two years and took a social work diploma at Liverpool University. Ann then began to work as a probation officer in Merseyside in Liverpool, which she found very difficult, but, "It's been good for the books for procedure." She talked with murderers in prison during this work. She explained further how her training has helped her writing. "When you are a probation officer and somebody comes to court who is going to plead guilty, you write a social inquiry report for the court, unless it's a really minor offense. And that involves looking at people's backgrounds and why you think they committed the crime, which is brilliant training for matching character."

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Ann laughed—we were, of course, talking about fictional murder. "It is very appealing; you can't escape it. But I don't know why. I suppose it is because you know it is going to end—there will be a resolution."

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and don't feel free to move away from them. I find it quite limiting."

"Do you work with an editor a lot?"

"On the most recent book I made quite a lot of changes at her suggestion. The others, no, it has pretty much come out the way it started."

"Is it a different person every time who edits?"

"Until recently I have had the same person as when I started, but she left, and I took on another one whom I saw in London at the [World Mystery] Conference. It's quite strange getting used to someone different, because you do develop quite a close relationship with your editor, I think. Especially since Elizabeth is the one who sent me the letter that said, 'We are delighted to tell you that we can accept your book.'"

What was it like to get that letter? "That was amazing."

How did she feel while waiting to hear? "I thought it would just be too good to be true, really. I was already writing the second one, because I enjoyed it. Tim didn't read it until it was a book. I think until you are published, people don't take writers seriously. There are so many who say they are writing, who really just sit up in their bedrooms scribbling—kind of embarrassing. But when you are published, you can come out and say you did it."

It was not easy for Ann to find time to write. "It was hard when the girls were little. I used to get them quite well organized. Ruth [age six] slept a lot in the daytime when she was a baby, so I'd write when Sarah was at playgroup—only two and a half hours a day. It's quite good if you start as soon as you've got the time—if you don't get distracted with cups of coffee."

Does Ann isolate herself in a room? "No, I sit right here at this table. Isolation is impossible with children. You just learn to switch on and to switch off. At times the phone is always ringing, because Tim is in charge of bird protection schemes. So he's got volunteers phoning up to say that Peregrines have been stolen from Cumbria—totally mad. Or somebody has found a rare bird. And we are always having people to stay, because we put up survey workers for a night before they go up to count Merlins in the Uplands. We set them up with a good meal before they get sent off into the hills. So it's fairly hectic, but fun. We meet lots of good people."

So then birders are not all bad? "Oh no," she laughed. "Some of my best friends are birders."

"I think it is admirable that you have combined mystery and birdwatching—such a great combination."

"I always enjoyed reading mysteries. So when I thought it would be nice to write a book, it seemed right to write one that I'd enjoy reading myself."

Ann mentioned earlier that she gives talks. What does she usually talk about? "I talk a lot about birds; the experiences that led to the books, the places that I've been and experiences twitching; examples of local rare birds and the

distances that people have traveled to see them. There was a Baillon's Crake [*Porzana pusilla*], which is very rare—I think a first for Britain—in a town park in Sunderland just south of the river, and they are amazed to hear that someone came up from London to see it—to be there at dawn. And then went home to fetch his wife in the afternoon because she is a twitcher as well, and she hadn't been able to get off work in the morning. To them, London is a million miles away and, anyway, to think of going to London twice in one day just to see a bird! Then I talk about Hilbre and all the things that happened to us there—lots of adventures. We both worked as auxiliary coast guards while we were there. We helped pass messages up the river to help get the lifeboat up past the estuary. They would be out of radio contact with the main headquarters, and so we would get called up then to operate the radio and pass messages on, get them on track. Had a few hairy moments. I got lost in the fog walking outside one night; it was really pretty nasty."

How did she find her way? "I really panicked. And then I heard a dog barking on the mainland. I took a chance and was able to walk ashore. I know I shouldn't have gone out without a compass."

How about a flashlight? "It was really fog—really thick."

Ann continued. "Then, I talk about Fair Isle for *Murder in Paradise*—the plot has quite a lot to do with things that happened in the past on an island—and the effect it has on a closed, small community. All those stories come from people I've talked to on Fair Isle."

And Fair Isle is where she met Tim. "I worked there for one season, the end of April to November. And then I went back the next year. I liked it so much I went there for another season, and Tim came up to see me in the second year.

A Prey to Murder is about the theft of birds of prey, which came out of the experience we had working in Wales. Actually Tim worked in Wales, and I helped. Just before we married, Tim had this very secure, safe job in industry. When we decided to get married, he announced he was giving it all up to do a three-month contract with the RSPB! And I said, 'Where will we live?' And he said, 'They'll probably give us a caravan [trailer].' But they didn't give us a caravan; they gave us a bungalow right up in the mountains in Wales. We were just married, just off our honeymoon, and we had to share everything with four other blokes who were up there doing survey work. Terribly romantic! It was really cold, bitter cold. No heating.

But it was a lovely summer. We walked the Penrhyn coastal path, looking to find the old traditional aeries that had been taken over by the Peregrines, and we had some cops and robbers stuff. When we were staking out aeries, we actually caught people going down on ropes to take the young. Falconers steal them—unscrupulous falconers. Then they breed them in captivity and sell them. There was a piece about it in the [*London*] *Observer*. They found a trail of

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Which of her books is her most favorite? "*Murder in Paradise*, I think. I

wrote that when I was pregnant with Ruth and we were living in the Midlands. I hated living there, near Birmingham. Tim had just gotten his first permanent full-time job with the RSPB. So we went there, knowing the place was hopeless for birds. He was totally miserable—never saw anything. It was a dreadful four years. I just kept thinking it would be so great to go to the coast to have the baby, so I started to write about Fair Isle, which I love. But of course, Ruth was born near Birmingham. No matter; now we are where we want to be."

Later I enjoyed the pleasure of their extensive birding library as we drank a little of the region's specialty—Newcastle Brown Ale. Tim was sprawled on the floor with his notes and cards, meticulously filled out for each bird he had identified in the preceding month. He had much to report. We spent some time looking at pictures of our Greenland [Greater] White-fronted Goose. Tim was very thorough. I felt fortunate to have enjoyed the Cleeves' hospitality. And I looked forward to recommending Ann Cleeves' mysteries to everyone when I returned to the States.

CASSANDRA L. OXLEY, a fledgling birdwatcher and naturalist who has "become completely beguiled by birds," is at work on a mystery novel that she hopes to finish "before the year 2000." She recently visited England, staying in Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex, with "wonderfully hospitable and encouraging relatives," who made the Cleeves interview possible. Two days before meeting the Cleeves, she interviewed over tea in the author's home another very famous British mystery writer, P. D. James, who was "very friendly and warm." Sandy works in the School Division at Houghton Mifflin Company in Boston.

The novels of Ann Cleeves have once before received attention in *Bird Observer*. See "A Bird in the Hand: the Mystery Novels of Ann Cleeves" by Robert A. Campbell, 17 (6) December 1989: 320-21.



Snapshot of Ann Cleeves in her home in Northumberland, England, in October 1990.

Photo by C. L. Oxley