BOOKS

BOOKMARK

Mary Bly and the poetry of romance

LAURIE HERTZEL

A poignant scene at the heart of Mary Bly's new novel, "Lizzie & Dante" (the Dial Press, available June 1), takes place on a yacht anchored off the coast of Elba. In the yacht's library, the character Lizzie falls into a conversation with Joseph, a poet, a plain-spoken, cantankerous old dude.

She tells Joseph her secret: She is dying of cancer.

The two discuss James Wright's famous poem "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota."

(If you don't remember that poem, you should look it up — it's the one with the heart-stopping last line: "I have wasted my life.")

"Wright was good at talking about difficult stuff," Joseph tells Lizzie. "What we need from poetry, what we *require,* is a way of talking about the impossible."

It's a thrilling scene to find buried deep in a romantic novel about love, death and Italy, but not at all surprising given the book's author. Mary Bly is the daughter of Minnesota poet Robert Bly, who was with Wright that afternoon at Bill Duffy's farm when Wright lazed in the hammock, watching the chicken hawk and the bronze butterfly, listening to the clanging of the cowbells.

The scene fits quite naturally in the book, but it is also a lovely homage to Mary's father and his poet friends Wright and Donald Hall (upon whom the character of Joseph is based).

"Lizzie & Dante" is not Mary Bly's first book, but it is the first novel to be published under her real name. She has published a memoir and a series of historical romance novels — yes, the kind once called "bodice rippers" — under the pen name Eloisa James.

"Lizzie & Dante" is something different, a moving modern-day love story laced with poetry.

Like Bly herself, Lizzie is a professor at Fordham University and a Shakespeare scholar. Bly is a cancer survivor, diagnosed shortly after her mother, writer Carol Bly, died of cancer. Lizzie is battling stage three cancer, and the outlook is grim.

She has come to Elba to vacation with friends, one of whom is writing a screenplay based on a modern interpretation of "Romeo and Juliet," which leads to many fascinating discussions about character and authorial intent. (Is Romeo actually in love with Mercutio? Is Juliet the one who is filled with lust and pushes things?)

When the Elba vacation is over, Lizzie plans to go home and die. She has decided against any more treatments.

But then she meets Dante, a chef. He's funny and charming, well-read and intelligent, and now what? Is he just a summer fling? Does she have to tell him that she is dying? Is it fair for her to give up when so many people love her?

A turning point comes in that yacht library when Joseph tells her, "You are Wright's bronze butterfly, an exquisite gift to the world."

"Who'd want to be a butterfly?" Lizzie asks herself. "Beautiful, short-lived."

Born in Minnesota, educated at Harvard, Oxford and Yale, Bly is a scholar who has always loved historical romances.

"But my father was a poet, and he would have preferred that I had fallen in love with Whitman," she wrote in a 2005 essay in the New York Times. "So he laid down the law: For every romance, I read a classic."

Her bodice rippers are the thinking woman's romance novels, marked by sophisticated writing and attentiveness to authentic period details. I hope — and assume — she will continue to write them.

But it's also good to see her shuck the rustling taffeta of the Georgian era for a bikini and sandals, and to see her sizzling sex scenes laced with a bit of poetry.

Laurie Hertzel is the Star Tribune's senior editor for books. On Facebook: facebook.com/startribunebooks.

The striated caracara. iStock

An audacious bird like no other

NONFICTION: A fascinating look at the striated caracara, an endangered bird of prey.

By MICHAEL SCHAUB
Special to the Star Tribune

A Most Remarkable Creature
By: Jonathan Meiburg.
Publisher: Alfred A. Knopf, 384 pages, $30.

For Jonathan Meiburg, meeting striated caracaras in the Falkland Islands was something like love at first sight. It's not a surprise that he took so quickly to the birds — he's an ornithologist, and he even named the indie rock band he fronts, Shearwater, after the migrating seabird.

But the caracaras were something else — the endangered birds "refuse to behave like a species on the verge of extinction. They'll pluck the cap from your head, tug at the zippers of your backpack, and meet your eye with a forthright, impish gaze," Meiburg writes.

Meiburg's debut book, "A Most Remarkable Creature," is more than just a love letter to the striated caracaras, although it's definitely that; it's also a fascinating look at history, evolution and how humans interact with the creatures that we share the planet with.

Meiburg writes about his first encounter with the birds: "The first ones I saw stared back at me so intensely that I felt slightly abashed, as if I owed them an explanation." He recounts visiting Evita, a caracara that lives in an English falconry center, writing that "it's her eyes that hold you — huge, dark, curious, forthright. She doesn't look past you with vague disinterest, as the other birds do; she looks into you, which is charming but also unnerving."

The author dives deep into history and travels the globe to gain a better understanding of the birds. He writes about Charles Darwin, who observed the "false eagles" in the Falklands, and William Henry Hudson, the author who had a fascination with chimango caracaras. In one engrossing section, Meiburg recounts his voyage to Guyana in search of red-throated caracaras, the cousins of the birds that have captured his imagination.

The book ends with something of a call to arms — the striated caracaras, he writes, are in danger of disappearing: "Their small population and range are red flags of impending extinction, and humans have done them few favors in the Falklands, where introduced predators and decades of persecution have taken a toll on their members, their prey, and their habitats."

He suggests that the caracaras might thrive in cities, far from their remote Falklands home, while allowing that a plan to introduce them to urban environments would be unlikely to be adopted. Still, he writes, "we may need to stretch our ideas of wildlife conservation in ways that seem risky, even reckless, if we want to save" the birds.

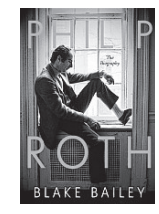
Meiburg is an enormously skilled writer, and even if you've never heard of striated caracaras, you're likely to be drawn in by his enthusiasm and elegant prose. And while "A Most Remarkable Creature" is an endlessly interesting look at the birds, Meiburg proves to be just as adept at writing about the people he's encountered along the way. Skillfully researched and beautifully written, Meiburg's debut is a most remarkable book.

Michael Schaub is a member of the board of the National Book Critics Circle. He lives in Texas.

Tiresome and titillating view of Philip Roth

NONFICTION: Biography devotes far more space to the author's marriages and sex life than to his literary legacy.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
Special to the Star Tribune



Philip Roth: The Biography
By: Blake Bailey.
Publisher: W.W. Norton, 896 pages, $45.

Philip Roth was one of the greatest writers of the second half of the 20th century. Prolific, profane and darkly comedic, he challenged conventional wisdom about Jewish assimilation and identity, sexual hedonism, American culture and politics, and the boundaries separating "fact" from "fiction."

In this authorized biography, Blake Bailey, who has written books about John Cheever, Richard Yates and Charles Jackson, draws on Roth's personal and professional correspondence, and interviews with Roth himself as well as dozens of family members, friends and lovers, to provide an intimate portrait of his creative, combative, complex subject.

Bailey examines Roth's middle-class, Jewish upbringing in Weequahic, N.J.; his undergraduate and graduate courses in creative writing and literary criticism, and his teaching jobs at several colleges and universities. He reviews responses to Roth's "breakout" short stories, "Defender of the Faith" and "Eli the Fanatic," and "Goodbye Columbus" and "Portnoy's Complaint," including allegations that he was a self-hating Jew.

Bailey canvasses contemporary assessments of Roth's 31 books. He documents Roth's support of dissident writers behind the Iron Curtain, his fraught friendships with Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, John Updike and William Styron, and his frustration that he was not awarded a Nobel Prize.

That said, "Philip Roth: The Biography" devotes far more space to "shmutz" (Yiddish for filth) — Roth's sexual appetite — than to his literary legacy. Roth's catastrophic marriages to Maggie Martinson and Claire Bloom take center stage. Bailey provides details of an 18-year-long affair with a neighbor (whose identity he hides with a pseudonym!), on whom he pressed a semen-encrusted napkin. Roth taught his nurse how to perform oral sex. Bloom's daughter accused him of propositioning her best friend. Playing Pygmalion, Roth complained about a young partner's "dyke hair" and took her to a posh stylist, where he ogled other customers.

Highlighting Roth the organ grinder is justified, Bailey implies, because, like Mickey Sabbath, Roth aspired "to affront and affront till there was no one on earth unaffronted" and mock bourgeois piety. Bailey also demonstrates that virtually all of the women with whom Roth slept "appeared" (along with male relatives, friends and rivals) in his fiction.

Perhaps titillating, this approach becomes tiresome. Roth often had it both ways, explaining how characters differed from their "real life" models, while acknowledging that Mickey Sabbath's mistress had only one source. More important, as if to refute what literary critics call "the biographical fallacy," Roth insisted that characterizations in novels are "produced by the demands of the narrative." For this reason, in "The Plot Against America," Roth's brother "became a rather unpleasant (an un-Sandy-like)" follower of the anti-Semitic Charles Lindbergh.

As he connects real-life people to fictional characters, Bailey does not illuminate Roth's broader themes. And, although Roth freely discussed (along with Alex Portnoy) the perpetual warfare between his sexual longings, "often of a perverse nature," and his "strongly felt ethical and altruistic impulses," one wonders whether, if he could read Bailey's book, he would conclude, with Oscar Wilde, "that biography adds to death a new terror."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Next Sunday "The Bookseller of Florence," by Ross King. And "The Souvenir Museum," by Elizabeth McCracken.