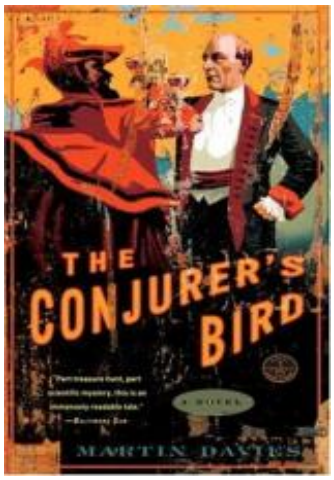
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The Conjurer's Bird: A Novel

by Martin Davies



About the Book

In 1774, an unusual bird was spotted on Captain Cook's second expedition to the South Seas. This single specimen was captured, preserved, and brought back to England --- and no other bird of its kind was ever seen again. The bird was given to naturalist Joseph Banks, who displayed it proudly in his collection until it too disappeared. Were it not for a colored drawing created by the ship's artist, it would seem that the Mysterious Bird of Ulieta had never existed.

Two hundred years later, naturalist John Fitzgerald gets a call from an old friend asking him to join the search for the bird's remains. He traces the bird's history, uncovering surprising details about the role of a woman known only as Miss B in Joseph Banks's life and career. Could she be the key to solving the mystery --- to finally finding the lost Bird of Ulieta?

Seamlessly leaping between two time periods, **The Conjurer's Bird** is at once the story of Joseph Banks's secret life and of Fitz's thrilling and near-impossible race to find the elusive bird.

A Book Sense Notable Book

Discussion Guide

1. What stylistic differences separate the sections of the novel set in the 1700s and those set in the present?

2. Is this a particularly English story, or could the novel be just as naturally set in the United States? Why or why not?

3. Each major character in the novel experiences the intersection of discovery, science, and "the vagaries of chance" (p. 374). Joseph Banks "came to realize later that discovery was not a science" (p. 16). Mary Burnett "did not expect to be

noticed. Discovery is not a science; there is too much chance in it" (p. 17). And Fitz believes that "the discovery of most things comes down to luck. People often feel uncomfortable about that. They want discovery to be driven by something more meaningful than coincidence" (p. 333). Is the author using scientific discovery as a metaphor here? What various personal discoveries are made in the course of the story and how much do they depend on random chance?

4. How would you describe Joseph Banks's character? Is his fury at Mary's departure reasonable, despite the fact that the entire plot is his idea and she only leaves one day prior to the agreed-upon departure date? Does the following passage suggest that he never believed she would actually do it: "By running off ahead of him she had placed him in an impossible position, and as a result he had been forced to give up his greatest adventure. If he had sailed with Cook, he reasoned, all would be well. But her rashness had made it impossible. It was intolerable, and it was not of his making" (p. 298)? Why does the author include the section about Banks's equanimity with "the smiling brown people of the southern seas" (p. 102)?

5. What does Potts hope to gain by sending the Martha Ainsby letter to Fitz? What simple trick makes the letter so misleading?

6. What does it reveal about Mary that "as she watched her father edging toward ruin, she was aware of her love for him like a sharpening pain. The more fallible he revealed himself to be, the more she loved him" (p. 148) and "she watched him slowly breaking down, and the pain of her love for him grew sharper. She knew she would accept any suffering for his sake..." (p. 152). Is this brand of love naïve or generous? How does her love for Banks compare to her love for her father?

7. Is Banks in love with Mary? Or is he really in love with his work?

8. Fitz traces his grandfather's notorious quest for an elusive African peacock as a parallel story to his own. What do the two tales have in common? How does Fitz find hope in his grandfather's story despite its tragic underpinnings?

9. Fitz notes the irony inherent in our society's neurotic recording of ephemera: "We live in a society that is strangely superstitious about written records. Even while we're content to countenance the tearing down of rain forests and the destruction of countless unknown organisms every day, we hold on grimly to our documents and papers. Few of us are immune to this" (pp. 164?65). Do you agree with his assessment? What benefits to nature, if any, does this ruthless recording offer?

10. After being ensconced at Richmond, why does Mary go out of her way to remind Joseph that she "is no longer what they call a maiden" (p. 176)?

11. What "unwonted clarity" accompanies Fitz's anger after his bedroom is ransacked (p. 193)? What does he do with this revelation?

12. The mystery of Fitz's personal tragedy and the mystery of Mary Burnett's disappearance are each revealed to hinge on a child. How? Why, in each case, does the issue involving the child throw the romantic relationship off kilter? Did this bridge between the historical and the modern stories surprise you?

13. Can Fitz's final hoax, designed to put Potts and Anderson out of their misery, be construed as ethical in any way?

Author Bio

Martin Davies, a senior producer at BBC Television, is the author of two mysteries featuring Sherlock Holmes's housekeeper. He lives in London.

Critical Praise

"[A] gripping book of literary suspense. . . . Davies indulges in clever speculation about the bird's whereabouts and adds an appealing strain of romance surrounding the identity of Banks's mistress. . . . A captivating novel."

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