

Contemporary Misanthropy: *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens

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Where the Crawdads Sing (Penguin, 2018) is the popular first novel by nature writer Delia Owens, who finds herself at the heart of two maelstroms.

The first is the commercial success of her novel and the release this July of the movie version of *Where the Crawdads Sing*, produced by actor Reese Witherspoon. Witherspoon's book club helped sales of *Crawdads* reach 15 million by August of this year.

The second storm swirling about Owens is the fact that she, her former husband Mark Owens and his son Christopher are wanted for questioning by Zambian authorities concerning the 1995 murder of an alleged poacher, a murder actually broadcast by ABC television in 1996.

It is tempting to find aspects of an author's life in the pages of his or her fiction. In the case of Owens and *Where the Crawdads Sing*, however, many are treating the novel, which includes a murder mystery, as evidence in an imaginary trial. It is not the purpose of this review to speculate on the Owenses' possible knowledge of the murder in Zambia. However, the novel itself and Delia Owens's appended commentary do invite consideration of her work of over 20 years as a conservationist in parts of Africa.

Where the Crawdads Sing tells the story of Kya, who as a very young girl in 1952 is abandoned by her family and left to survive in the marsh country of coastal North Carolina. When Kya is six years old, her mother leaves her and her older siblings after being beaten by Kya's alcoholic father. One by one the siblings also leave the family's remote, dilapidated shack in the marsh to escape their father.

Left alone with Pa, Kya lives in fear of him, fending for herself for days on end—at the age of six—while he is off to town in his boat, drinking and gambling. During this time, truant officers from nearby Barkley Cove manage to lure Kya out of hiding with the promise of a hot lunch, but in her one day at school she is mistreated by the other children as “marsh trash,” a term they have learned from their parents, and she never goes back.

Living on grits and learning to cook by trial and error, the young child survives and adapts to her isolation, and she commences her intimate relationship with nature.

Sometimes she heard night-sounds she didn't know or jumped from lightning too close, but whenever she stumbled it was the land that caught her. Until at last, at some unclaimed moment, the heart-pain seeped away like water into sand. Still there, but deep. Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother.

By a stroke of luck, Kya's attempts at housekeeping touch her father's heart, and he sobers up for the most part, treating her with a precarious kindness and even making her his fishing partner. But when she is 10, Pa

disappears for good, leaving her *entirely on her own* with the shack, his boat and the marsh. Kya's intelligence, determination and resourcefulness easily win over the reader, as long as the reader refrains from asking reasonable questions.

Owens does recognize, however, that Kya cannot survive without money and participation in the local economy. She digs mussels in the marsh and sells them to a wharf store run by a kindly “colored” man named Jumpin', who with his wife Mabel comes to care about Kya and guides her through difficulties large and small. Another character Kya comes to know is an older boy named Tate, who shares her love of the marsh and falls deeply and honorably in love with her. Tate's character is a stark contrast to another boy she comes to know over the years, Chase Andrews, Barkley Cove's beloved and semi-discreetly promiscuous football star.

The chapters in the book dealing with Kya are interspersed with chapters set in 1969 that follow the police investigation of the adult Chase's violent death. Neither narrative is particularly complex and transitioning from one to the other is easy for the reader.

Importantly, Tate teaches the young Kya to read, and over the years, from textbooks and science journals he provides, she manages to become an acclaimed naturalist and nature artist.

The romantic triangle of Tate, Kya and Chase develops and eventually merges with the story of Chase's possible murder, for which Kya is put on trial.

Delia Owens the nonfiction nature writer demonstrates in *Crawdads* a fine eye for the natural world and a good ear for language, and most of the best passages in the novel are her lyrical descriptions of the flora and fauna of the marsh. Dry grass “rattled like bones,” Kya maneuvers her boat into “a place with dark lagoons in a throat of oaks.”

Ultimately, *Where the Crawdads Sing* is a page turner and little more, with its love story, its murder mystery and its courtroom drama. It would be wrong to accuse *Crawdads* of posing as art if it weren't for the fact that in one of her comments at the end of the book, Owens puts forth a theory of fiction that endorses falsification of character:

I loved the freedom of writing fiction. Of letting my imagination go as far as it would take me. You can always pull back, take a more conservative course. But why not soar for a while just to see what happens? *A character can look, say, feel whatever works best for the tale.* You can never do that with nonfiction (emphasis added).

By “whatever works best for the tale,” Owens means that a character can do whatever immediately fits the plot. Actually, that's cheating, and the best writers don't do it. The credibility of character—and consequently of plot and theme—suffers.

Readers of *Crawdads* are asked to suspend a ponderous amount of disbelief so that Owens can turn the plot in the directions she wants. For instance, it occurs to no one, not Kya's mother or her older siblings, to take the helpless six-year-old with them when they run away, but then Owens is simply setting up Kya's eventual life of isolation.

The novel is littered with such "conveniences" (or contrivances) as when the father inexplicably embarks on four years of relative sobriety and kindness, just long enough for Kya to reach the age of 10, when Pa dutifully vanishes. As Owens explains in her commentary,

I was careful to write her survival in a realistic and believable way. To me, the story had to be feasible. I purposely kept Pa around until Kya was ten, an age at which she was capable of gathering food and firewood, cooking, and boating in the marsh and sea. ... So by the time she was truly alone, it was quite possible for her to survive on her own abilities.

To portray Kya's father with anything like psychological realism would not serve Owens's plot as she has storyboarded it.

Such falsifications undermine the very heart of the novel. The devoted Tate goes off to college and fails to contact Kya even once for over four years. Chase, who genuinely seems to care for Kya early on, turns out to be a cad, but that does not explain his behavior later in the novel, when for purposes of plot—and perhaps ideology—he is made out to be something much worse. And the characterization of Kya herself is sacrificed to plot at the novel's end.

Kya learns about life from observing the wildlife surrounding her in the marsh. Her observation of insects and birds teaches her about mating, fidelity and self-preservation. The "nature/nurture" debate is clearly important to the novel, but we are asked to believe not only that a self-taught adolescent can master biology, entomology and botany to a professional level but that she does the same with drawing and painting. She also becomes a published poet with many books to her credit. Unspoiled nature's child as a Renaissance woman! It is too much to ask.

Owens comments, "Kya is every little girl and one in a million. Kya is all of us. ... I believe in her with all my heart." As Hemingway said, isn't it pretty to think so? *Where the Crawdads Sing* partakes too much of fantasy to hold the mirror up to nature. It makes for light entertainment, but because of its falsifications it has little to teach us about ourselves or our society.

Yet apart from the artistic costs of the novel's choice to abandon realistic human psychology to indulge in fantasy, *Where the Crawdads Sing* suffers from a more profound weakness, and this has to do with the type of fantasy in which it indulges. A discussion of these questions will inevitably involve giving away plot details, so let the reader beware.

Owens grew up in Georgia and earned her B.S. in zoology at the University of Georgia and her Ph.D. in animal behavior at the University of California, Davis. She is the co-author, with her former husband Mark Owens, of the bestselling memoir *Cry of the Kalahari* (1984), which won the John Burroughs Award for writing in the field of natural history, and recounts the couple's study of lions, hyenas and other animals in the Kalahari Desert in Botswana. She and Mark Owens have also co-authored two other memoirs recounting experiences in remote parts of Africa, *The Eye of the Elephant* (1992) and *Secrets of the Savanna* (2006).

Amazon.com describes the Owenses' *The Eye of the Elephant* as a "true account of battling the elephant poachers of Zambia." It is the nature of this "battle" that has the Zambian authorities interested in questioning the Owenses.

In July of this year, Jeffrey Goldberg, editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*, published in that magazine an investigative report recounting the story of

the filmed murder and providing evidence, much of it hearsay he garnered in Zambia, that Mark and Christopher Owens are guilty of beatings and perhaps the murder of alleged poachers in Zambia's North Luangwa National Park.

Goldberg describes the fatal shooting of a man in the 1996 ABC documentary "Deadly Game: The Mark and Delia Owens Story," broadcast on the network's news magazine *Turning Point*:

ABC producers included in this documentary the filmed murder of an alleged poacher, executed while lying collapsed on the ground after having already been shot. The victim is not identified by the story's narrator, the journalist Meredith Vieira. Nor is the identity of the person or persons who fired the fatal shots off-camera disclosed. There is little in the video to suggest that the person killed was a poacher, and indeed, the ABC script refers to the victim as a "trespasser," though it is also unclear where this trespassing might have taken place.

According to Goldberg, Mark Owens commanded an extralegal corps of "game scouts" in North Luangwa and "militarized" the immense 2,400-square-mile park. Goldberg writes that Mark bought the scouts' loyalty with money, but he cites Delia Owens as saying that Mark also paid them in guns and jungle knives. Goldberg's sources told him that Mark Owens' son Christopher was put in charge of training the scouts in hand-to-hand combat and that Christopher "frequently beat the game scouts as a form of discipline." Goldberg also reports that multiple sources in Zambia told him that suspected poachers were beaten, staked to the ground and left to suffer in the sun.

The most damning evidence presented in Goldberg's article is the report of a letter allegedly faxed by Mark Owens to professional hunter P.J. Fouche, who ran a government-licensed safari near North Luangwa. In it, Owens boasts,

To date I have flown eight airborne antipoaching operations over your area, including four in which I inserted scouts on ambush... Two poachers have been killed and one wounded that I know of thus far, and we are just getting warmed up.

This passage is followed by a request that Fouche provide Owens' group with more ammunition "to help keep our anti-poaching efforts alive in your area."

Finally, in a 2010 article, "The Hunted," published in the *New Yorker*, Goldberg reported being told by Chris Everson, the ABC cameraman who filmed the 1995 murder of the alleged poacher, that it was Christopher Owens who committed that killing. Everson is also wanted for questioning in Zambia. For her part, Delia Owens denied having any knowledge of the murder in a 2010 interview with Goldberg.

Whatever the Owenses' actual knowledge of or participation in beatings or worse in Zambia may have been, it appears at least likely that their conduct in the name of conservation was unsavory. It reeks of a simplistic and misanthropic condemnation of poachers that remains oblivious to the desperate economic conditions in Africa that result in the illegal activities. Saving nature and the animals, in fact, is not possible without an end to predatory capitalism.

Some readers have found suggestive parallels between the 1995 Zambia murder and elements of *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Like the heroine Kya, Delia Owens is a naturalist with a long history of being isolated from other humans. Laura Miller wrote of the temptation to find such parallels

in a 2019 article in *Slate*:

Having her heroine stand accused of murder echoes the Owens' Zambian experience and the subsequent ordeal of becoming the subject of a 18,000-word exposé ["The Hunted"] in a prominent magazine. Even more eyebrow-raising is the plot twist in the novel's final pages: It turns out Kya did, after all, murder Chase.

The most salient parallel between Delia Owens and Kya is summed up in this observation by Miller: "Both are lonely, yet prefer the company of animals to people; the Owenses' memoirs recount one long search for life outside the human fold."

What accounts for the outsized popularity of *Where the Crawdads Sing*? Owens has undoubted skill at placing one word after another. The romance will attract some. There is also the appeal of a plucky young heroine, intelligent and resourceful, who can survive almost without any human interaction at all. Clearly, the sense that organized society is threatening and hostile speaks to many at this time in history. The desire to retreat outside its boundaries can also tap into a variety of "Don't Tread on Me" and "libertarian" moods.

As a book written for adults, *Crawdads* might be expected to treat Kya's relation to society with more seriousness and acuity. But the novel is not a critical examination of 1950s society and how it would have treated an orphan, an undefended individual (à la Dickens). Owens' attempts at such an examination are one-sided and superficial, the shop clerks and Christian mothers of Barkley Cove almost uniformly reviling Kya.

When Dickens' orphans are mistreated, it is the work of a heartless, profit-driven system acting through its institutions and exerting pressures on individuals. Kya's mistreatment, on the other hand, seems to be attributable to the "natural" and near-universal meanness of people.

The fantasy of isolation persists to the novel's end, at which point Kya, still living in her upgraded shack with her common-law partner Tate, one day dies alone in her boat "in a lagoon surrounded by sycamores touching the sky." Owens tells us Kya, now 64, was "Still young, so beautiful," yet also that "[s]he had lived long enough to see the bald eagles make a comeback; for Kya that was long enough."

Owens has only an obscured—almost a child's—perspective on social reality. But there is something more sinister than this. Owens makes much in the novel of Kya's observing the natural world and drawing conclusions about human relations. For instance, Kya "learns" about mating by watching the murderous instincts of fireflies. Owens translates such animal behavior to the human world with a chilling readiness and a pseudo-scientific claptrap that opens up Hitlerian notions of the human:

Just like their whiskey, the marsh dwellers bootlegged their own laws—not like those burned onto stone tablets or inscribed on documents, but deeper ones, stamped in their genes. Ancient and natural, like those hatched from hawks and doves. When cornered, desperate or isolated, man reverts to those instincts that aim straight at survival. Quick and just. They will always be the trump cards because they are passed on more frequently from one generation to the next than the gentler genes. It is not a morality, but simple math. Among themselves, doves fight as often as hawks.

The most acute instance of misanthropy in the novel is the murder of

Chase Andrews. This act of #MeToo-style vigilante justice, we realize, has been elaborately planned and committed in cold blood. We have not been prepared for anything like this from Kya.

Kya is acquitted at her trial, which the reader is first led to believe is a frame-up, and lives a long and happy life afterward. Nor does she ever exhibit a moment's remorse at having taken a human life, which either wholly falsifies her character or requires a radical reevaluation that must conclude she is either psychopathic—a condition for which we have had no clues—or has been bizarrely shaped by watching the animal kingdom. The novel closes with imagery unmistakably justifying and celebrating the murder.

Yet Kya is the book's most civilized character! Science, art and poetry thrive in the isolated wild child, safe from the loathsome human society that created them. What nonsense.

Kya's preposterousness aside, what is the novel's—what is Owens's—excuse for celebrating the murder? Many readers will feel at least a degree of discomfort with this way of closing the novel.

In any case, as she does in so many other instances, Owens stacks the deck in relation to Chase's death, which occurs "offscreen," painlessly and effortlessly, so to speak. The reader is never brought into contact with its brutality. If Owens had described in graphic detail Kya's act of bloody violence, how many admirers would the character retain? Unfortunately, the author seems quite capable of closing her eyes to the horrifying consequences of such actions.

Kya and her marsh faintly disguise a dark pessimism about humanity behind a rhapsodic celebration of escape and isolation. Owens' misanthropy speaks to the demoralized response of sections of the affluent middle class to the present conditions of generalized crisis. It also speaks to the urgent need for a more humane, honest and clear-sighted literature.



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