



## **Better Living Through Birding: Notes from a Black Man in the Natural World by Christian Cooper**

Comstock Township Library, Friday 7/26 at 12 PM

### Discussion questions

- 1) Cooper paints a very bleak image of his closeted childhood: "I felt as if I were locked inside a coffin under six feet of earth, in utter darkness, slowly suffocating. I pounded on the inside lid desperate for someone to let me out, but no one could hear my screams. No one knew there was someone alive down there. Friends and family walked over my grave, oblivious." (pg. 25) How did his experience make you feel?
- 2) Escapism is key for young Cooper's survival: "When I couldn't escape to the outdoors, I fled in the opposite direction—internally—to my second great refuge: science fiction and fantasy." (pg. 27) Could you relate to this experience? Have you ever had to use escapism to endure the world around you?
- 3) "And since I was in the midst of a childhood spent carefully repressing any outward expression of gayness, tight emotional control became a critical surviving tool. Spock, thriving in Starfleet while steadfastly keeping his bothersome human emotions under lock and key, offered a way forward." (pg. 29) What did you think of Cooper's idolization of Spock and his decision to utilize this character to help him through childhood?
- 4) Growing up reading comics, working at Marvel must have been surreal for Cooper and it's amazing that he seized the opportunity for better representation in comics. Why was it important for Cooper to write gay comic book characters?
- 5) Cooper does a great job of introducing us to birds and sharing ones that are personally significant to him through the text. Reflecting on what birds might mean to you and have represented in your own life, is there a specific species that you love? Maybe one you loathe? One that you'd love to see in person at least once in your lifetime?
- 6) Do you have any hobbies that take you outside? Have you ever gone birding, and if not, would you like to try it?

- 7) What did you think of Cooper's Five-Way Road pilgrimage? Are there specific places you would visit if you completed your own Five-Way Road (nature sites that represent earth/north, air/east, fire/south, water/west, and ether/spirit/center) trips?
- 8) Do you have a favorite travel story from the book?
- 9) Were you surprised by how Cooper's relationship with his dad, Francis, changed over time?
- 10) What do you think of Cooper's decision not to tell his father about the newfound cousin and the alternate story of what happened so long ago? (Pg. 231-232)
- 11) Had you previously heard about Cooper's incident in Central Park? What did you think about it at the time? What was it like to read about it in the book?
- 12) Close to the end of the book, Cooper crosses the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama (pg. 279-280). Why is this event important?

**If you are interested, there is more online about the author and the book:**

To read:

- Shondaland: <http://tinyurl.com/kba23357>
- The Guardian: <http://tinyurl.com/2bwkpant>
- The New York Times (guest opinion essay): <http://tinyurl.com/2s3n8w57>

To listen:

- Fresh Air (46 min.): <http://tinyurl.com/423jknux>
- Washington Post Well+Being (30 min.): <http://tinyurl.com/2zc93pk9>
- WNYC (49 min.) : <https://www.wnyc.org/story/better-living-through-birding/>

To watch:

- CBS Sunday Morning. (2024). Christian Cooper, the "Extraordinary Birder." (4.5 min.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1E71CwXJhI>
- Nat Geo Wild. (2023). Birds of Puerto Rico (full episode). Extraordinary Birder with Christian Cooper. (44 min.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6DDvpx0Md8>
- National Geographic UK. (2023). The beautiful birds of New York City Extraordinary Birder National Geographic Wild. (2 min.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYZBiD8flAM>
- Free Library of Philadelphia (55 min.): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gL6qbR0\\_ys](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gL6qbR0_ys)
- New York Times (with Amy Tan) (53 min.): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qcBW3Urhjk>