



Flyaway

By **Suzie Gilbert**
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Introduction

Suzie Gilbert once struggled to find her calling. But when she took a job working at the animal hospital near her home in New York's Hudson Valley, her passion was born. She began bringing abused and unwanted parrots home and volunteering at a local raptor rehabilitation center. Then came the ultimate commitment to her cause: turning her home into Flyaway, Inc., a nonprofit wild bird rehabilitation center.

Gilbert chronicles the years of her chaotic household-cum-bird-hospital with delightful wit, recounting the confusion that ensued as her husband and two young children struggled to live in a house where parrots shrieked Motown songs, nestling robins required food every 20 minutes, and recuperating herons took over the spare bathroom.

Often funny, sometimes painful, Gilbert's encounters with these beautiful creatures reveal profound truths not only about animals but also about our own lives—lessons of birth and death, suffering and empathy, holding on and letting go.

Questions for Discussion

1. The author bounced from place to place and job until she was in her early thirties, when she took a job at a Hudson Valley animal hospital. She was immediately drawn to injured and abused birds, and an all-consuming passion was born. Have your interests and passions changed during your life? Have you ever found a cause that changed your life?
2. Gilbert describes how she intended to open a very small, backyard bird rescue operation, and how it quickly spiraled out of control. Is there any way this could have been avoided, or is it unavoidable in any type of rescue organization?
3. Gilbert veers between believing that by making her children a part of her bird world she is giving them something valuable, and feeling guilty about depriving them of more of her time. By the end of the book, which do you believe was the case?
4. Is there a point where Gilbert's passion for her work becomes self-destructive? Do you believe that the impulse to help others can become an addiction ' although a more socially acceptable one?
5. The author believes that while some healed but unreleasable birds can deal with life in captivity, others cannot, and for them death is preferable to life in a cage. Do you agree, or do you believe that any life is better than death? Did you feel sympathy for Tanya, the rehabber whose values were so different from the author's?
6. The author states that every bird she's encountered has been memorable, with a distinct personality. Which of the birds in the book was the most memorable for you? Which of the human characters?
7. Have you ever been involved in a dispute between humans and wildlife ' issues such as the overpopulation of deer or geese in suburban areas, the rights of a person to develop their property vs. the rights of resident endangered wildlife? How do you view such disputes?
8. Did this book have any effect on the way you view wildlife?
9. If you had the time and/or the resources to become fully involved in a non-profit organization, would you choose to do so? Which type would you choose, and why? And do you believe that the highs one experiences with total immersion in a cause make the lows worth the pain, or not?
10. This book was originally written as ten loosely connected short stories. Did you like the eventual structure, or do you think it could have been written in an entirely different way? In what ways would the reading experience have been different if the book was indeed a collection of loosely connected stories?

About the Author

Suzie Gilbert lives in the Hudson Valley of New York. A longtime bird enthusiast, she began volunteering at a raptor rehabilitation center in 1990 and wrote the children's book *Hawk Hill* before opening her home-based bird rehabilitation organization, Flyaway, Inc., in 2002.