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Birds Without Wings

By Louis de Bernieres



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In his first novel since **Corelli's Mandolin**, Louis de Bernières creates a world, populates it with characters as real as our best friends, and launches it into the maelstrom of twentieth-century history. The setting is a small village in southwestern Anatolia in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire. Everyone there speaks Turkish, though they write it in Greek letters. It's a place that has room for a professional blasphemer; where a brokenhearted aga finds solace in the arms of a Circassian courtesan who isn't Circassian at all; where a beautiful Christian girl named Philothei is engaged to a Muslim boy named Ibrahim. But all of this will change when Turkey enters the modern world. Epic in sweep, intoxicating in its sensual detail, **Birds Without Wings** is an enchantment.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

It's been nearly a decade since *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* became a word-of-mouth bestseller (and then a major feature film), and devotees will eagerly dig into de Bernières' sweeping historical follow-up. This time the setting is the small Anatolian town of Eskibahçe, in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. The large cast of characters of intermixed Turkish, Greek and Armenian descent includes breathtakingly lovely Philothei, a Christian girl, and her beloved Ibrahim, the childhood friend and Muslim to whom she is betrothed. The narrative immediately sets up Philothei's death and Ibrahim's madness as the focal tragedy caused by the sweep of history—but this is a bit of a red herring. Various first-person voices alternate in brief chapters with an authorial perspective that details the interactions of the town's residents as the region is torn apart by war; a parallel set of chapters follows the life of Kemal Atatürk, who established Turkey as a modern, secular country. The necessary historical information can be tedious, and stilted prose renders some key characters (like Philothei) one-dimensional. But when de Bernières relaxes his grip on the grand sweep of history—as he does with the lively and affecting anecdotes involving the Muslim landlord Rustem Bey and his wife and mistress—the results resonate with the very personal consequences that large-scale change can effect. Though some readers may balk at the novel's sheer heft, the reward is an effective and moving portrayal of a way of life—and lives—that might, if not for Bernières's careful exposition and imagination, be lost to memory forever.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

"Destiny caresses the few, but molests the many," a proverb-prone narrator reflects as he begins the story of Eskibahçe, a small town in Anatolia, and of its inhabitants' fate in the turmoil of the early twentieth century. After generations of cheerful intermingling, the town's Muslim Turks, Christian Greeks, and Armenians are divided by the First World War and then by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. De Bernières gamely tries to illustrate the human cost—a complex series of migrations and persecutions—through a cast of endearing, folksy characters. He interleaves the narratives with the biography of Kemal Atatürk. But history, in this case, may be too vast for his approach; despite many affecting moments, both the big picture and the small stories are lost in an overwhelming sprawl.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

The ten years since the runaway success of De Bernières' *Corelli's Mandolin* have provided ample time for reviewers to sharpen their pencils. But potshots at his new novel are scarce, at least on this side of the Atlantic. Critics applaud the author's continued liberties with point of view, but the large cast of characters obscures the narrative focus; many don't rise above one-note characterization. Other critics argue that the collective power of these voices, not the individual timbre, counts. Where *Corelli's Mandolin* was a love story set against the backdrop of war, here the battlefield takes center stage. *The Guardian* claims that the Gallipoli set piece is "far beyond anything De Bernières has attempted or achieved up to now"—and if you're willing to taste kadinbudu köfte or iç pilâv and other local flavors, you'll enjoy the ride.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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