

Corvus – A Life with Birds by Esther Woolfson.
Granta 2008.

Corvus is a love story as well as a family saga: the family in question belongs to the author, Esther Woolfson, and the love interest is provided by a magpie called Spike and a rook called Chicken.

Esther Woolfson, as well as being a wife and mother, is also an acclaimed writer of short stories, and a student of Chinese at both the Hebrew University and the University of Edinburgh. Becoming a bird woman does not appear to have been in her plans, but she started with doves in the garden of her Glasgow home before progressing to a cockatiel called Bardie, a present for one of her daughters, then a rosella called Icarus and much later a conure called Marley, among others.

These are not, however, the avian stars of Corvus; as the title suggests, they are Spike and Chicken. Chicken (you'll have to read the book to see how and why she got her name) came as a baby, and when the book was published was still alive at the grand age of 17, Spike followed later. Ziki, a crow, is the last of the species and makes an entrance at the end of the book – perhaps a sequel about him will follow?

Esther Woolfson writes beautifully about her corvids, and especially the minutiae of their lives: it is clear from her description of the damage and depredation they carried out in the family home that she is blessed with a wonderfully fore-bearing family as well as enormous patience on her own part. But this is not just a biography of individual birds; it is also a book about the natural history of the two specific species and the crow family in general and their place in art, literature and legend.

Corvus is a charming and touching book, and will leave many readers gratified but envious of the life that Esther Woolfson has enjoyed with her birds.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh