

# Are you a bird man?

by Ian Watson

I took a walk this morning to our village post office and stopped for a cappuccino at the Cranks cafe just across the road. It's a rustic, vegetarian place which reminds me of the original Cranks I used to visit in Soho when I lived in London in the eighties. The coffee wasn't great today. The girl who made it was new and clearly hadn't yet earned the right to call herself a barista. I didn't mind too much, though, because it was warm and sunny and I was able to sit outside comfortably for the first time this year.

I drank my coffee slowly, did some writing and enjoyed feeling the warm tinge of the sun on my skin. There was a man, I'd say in his sixties, sitting alone at a nearby table eating an early lunch. Just as I was getting up to leave, he looked up at me and asked: 'are you a bird man'?

I had no idea what he meant. The first image that came to mind was of a shaman-figure I saw in a film clip once, who wore a feather-covered costume and strutted like a bird to evoke the spirit of some totem animal that his people revered. Did he mean that kind of bird man, I wondered? Or was he thinking of a falconer, the kind who will patiently train a bird of prey to return to his gloved hand? I didn't think so. Perhaps he meant a pigeon-fancier? I was wearing my beret rather than the customary flat-cap favoured by the latter, but maybe I looked the type who would spend half his life in a garden shed cradling the soft downy underfeathers of a racing pigeon. I certainly enjoy the soft, contented cooing sound that pigeons make, but that's as far as it goes with me and pigeons. Honest.

'I'm not sure.....', I offered. 'Why do you ask'?

He pointed to a small yellow-breasted bird trotting along the pathway next to the tables. 'I've been watching that one for a while', he said, 'and I'd like to know what it is'.

'Oh', I said, surprised that it had never occurred to me that all he was asking was whether I knew the names of birds.

'I'm pretty sure it's a wagtail', I said, 'although I can't tell you which one'.

He nodded and went back to his lunch. I left and wandered back up the hill, reflecting on the mysteries of language, and how the same few words could mean so many things and wondering whether I was, indeed, a bird man.

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