

Book Review: 'Pigeons - The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird'

by John Wilkens

"Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird" by Andrew D. Blechman; Grove; 256 pages; \$23.

In his 1980 movie "Stardust Memories," Woody Allen called pigeons "rats with wings." One had flown into his apartment. "It's probably one of those killer pigeons," he said. "You see? It's got a swastika under its wings."

He was being paranoid again, sometimes a funny sight. But people also laughed because pigeons have a reputation. He was only saying what a lot of people think: They carry disease. They eat garbage. They poop everywhere.

It hasn't gotten better for the birds in the quarter-century since Woody's hand-wringing, but this surprising and satisfying book could help change that. The pigeon comes across as not only misunderstood but majestic - heroic even.

Author Andrew D. Blechman explains in the opening chapter that he never really had strong feelings about pigeons, not even after one dumped on his head while he was interviewing for a job outside Rockefeller Center in New York.

Then one day, he was in line at a bodega to buy a tuna sandwich when he struck up a conversation with another man. Somehow, they got to talking about pigeons, and the man told him his brother races them. "Racing pigeons?" Blechman asked. And before long he was off to meet the racer, notebook and pen in hand.

That kind of unabashed curiosity fuels the book. A wide-eyed Blechman travels the world to learn more about pigeons, chasing this question: How did a bird that was once so loved become so hated?

He's confident that his passion for information will become the reader's. It does, thanks to tidbits like these:

- Pigeons have roamed the Earth, in one form or another, for more than 30 million years. They have populated every continent except Antarctica. Darwin used them heavily to support his theory of evolution.

- Egyptians might have been the first to use pigeons to send messages; they alerted the masses to the ascension of new pharaohs and to rising flood levels on the Nile. A pigeon delivered the news about the first Olympics and about Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo.

- Almost 1 million pigeons served in both world wars and are credited with saving thousands of lives. Iraqi insurgents use them still.

Blechman seems most impressed by the bird's athletic prowess. He writes, "While race horses receive all the glory, with their 35 mph sprints around a one-mile racetrack, homing pigeons - a mere pound of flesh and feathers - routinely fly over 500 miles in a single day at speeds exceeding 60 mph, finding their way home from a place they've never been before, and without stopping."

He spends a year watching Orlando Martinez - the guy he heard about in line at the bodega - prepare pigeons for the Main Event, an October race in New York. Martinez lives in ramshackle quarters and works only when he has to. His life is pigeons; the coop has a heated floor and he wants to add filtration systems for the air and water. On race days, he's a nervous wreck.

In the book, he comes across as one of the saner fanatics.

Dave Roth, in Phoenix, is a former public relations specialist who crusades against municipal efforts to get rid of pigeons with poison. He rescues birds, and his house is piled high with papers and bird poop.

When there are pigeons, there is poop, and Blechman doesn't shy away from the topic. We learn that the average bird produces 25 pounds of droppings each year. And that ancient Egyptians prized the stuff for fertilizer. Does it cause diseases in humans? His experts pooh-pooh the idea.

Roth has had success scuttling pigeon-extermination projects all across the country - he persuades governments to get rid of roosting places with netting and low-voltage wires instead - but some of his neighbors are unimpressed. One leaves beheaded pigeons on Roth's front porch.

And then there's Frank Tasker, "arguably the finest pigeon racer in all of England." Tasker is a maniac, constantly on the go with his birds, exercising them, medicating them, cleaning up after them. "I'm thinking about pigeons 24 hours a day," he says. "I only got one life to live, and I want to spend mine racing pigeons!"

Blechman tries to hang with him for two days and winds up feeling sorry for Tasker's "pigeon widow" of a wife, Ann. She tells him, in the book's saddest moment, "It's a selfish sport. It's always been about the birds. We never went on holiday. We never went out on weekends. Our children resented him."

All of this is delivered with a bemused detachment that fits the subject matter. They're just pigeons, after all.

Blechman is a talented observer and a light-on-his feet writer. He deftly carves the interesting from the extraneous.

There are two exceptions. One is the chapter about boxer Mike Tyson, a pigeon fancier. Blechman wants to interview him, but finds it impossible to pin the guy down. We don't get much beyond the name-dropping. The other is during his visit to the world of live pigeon shoots in Pennsylvania. Perfectly legal, they aren't terribly sporting; the shooters are about 30 yards away when the birds are released from spring-loaded boxes.

Blechman talks his way into a shoot - the others think he might be an animal activist in disguise - by claiming he, too, wants to fire at the pigeons. He does, with awkward results - awkward for him and for the reader.

One of Blechman's strengths is his objectivity, and he crosses the line there. "Now I feel like I need a shower," he writes.

He never really answers the question about why people hate pigeons. It just may be that familiarity - pigeons never migrate - breeds contempt. But intimacy is a step beyond familiarity, and this is as intimate a profile of pigeons as you'll ever read. What it breeds is respect.