

Introduction: Pigeonholed

*Some days you're the pigeon. Some days you're
the statue.*

—Anonymous

FOR MUCH OF MY LIFE, I DIDN'T HAVE A STRONG OPINION about pigeons. At best, I found their incessant bobbing and waddling mildly charming to watch as I walked through the streets of New York City. It was my college girlfriend who first alerted me to their nefarious lack of hygiene. They may *look* harmless, she informed me, but they're actually insidious carriers of hidden filth—"rats with wings"—that eat garbage off the streets and crap in their own nests.

Lamenting the city's lack of wildlife, I hung a bird feeder from the fire escape outside my barred windows in an effort to attract songbirds to my apartment. The feeder didn't attract robins or cardinals, but it was popular with pigeons. They flocked to my fire escape, landing in friendly, cooing clusters. They were animated, fun to watch, and they kept me company as I looked out onto an otherwise drab urban vista.

A few days later, I noticed my superintendent standing on the sidewalk contemplating the sudden rise in bird droppings around the building's entrance. I suspected I was in trouble when he looked up at my window and spied the bird feeder. He bounded up the fire escape, gave me a look

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of enraged incredulity, and promptly pitched my feeder onto the sidewalk below, where it exploded into a cloud of birdseed shrapnel. My nature experiment was clearly over.

Months after, I got a taste of pigeon prejudice firsthand. I was interviewing for a job outside Rockefeller Center when I felt a splat on my head and then, seconds later, several oozy drips down my ear and onto my freshly pressed white shirt. I was at a complete loss, too embarrassed to survey the damage. Could I just pretend it had never happened?

I sat there motionless, unsure what to do, and keenly aware of everyone else around me. It was as if the whole plaza had suddenly gone silent, all eyes focused on me—the crap-covered stooge. I reached for a napkin, but we were eating falafel sandwiches, and mine was already covered in tahini. My interviewer looked at me in stunned silence, face frozen in horror, eyes fixated on the gooey mess. “Oh, my,” he managed. “Oh, my.”

Then I met José Martinez. It was a dreary day, the sidewalks covered in graying slush. I was waiting in line at the corner bodega to pay for a tuna sandwich when I struck up a conversation with the man next in line. I have no idea how we started talking about pigeons, but this was New York City, after all, where pigeons are not an altogether unusual topic of discussion. He told me about his brother Orlando’s loft of racing pigeons.

“Racing pigeons?” I asked. Did he mean like the scruffy pigeons in the street that crap all over the city’s buildings? Had I misunderstood him? People don’t race birds—do they?

“My brother’s pigeons are like thoroughbreds,” José replied. Pigeon thoroughbreds? The following day, armed

with a pen and notebook, I journeyed to Orlando's home in Brooklyn to meet the pigeon man myself.

Alternating between enthusiasm for my project and frustration with my seemingly endless stupid questions, José's brother nonetheless opened up his pigeon-centric world to me. I spent a year with Orlando, tagging along with him to the very first stirrings of a new racing season and all the way to one of the biggest races of the year. The Bronx-based Main Event is the Kentucky Derby of the New York pigeon-racing community. At stake is over \$15,000 in prize money for the first-place finisher (plus tens of thousands more in side bets) and a year's worth of bragging rights for winning one of the metro area's most competitive races.

Orlando put it to me this way: "To walk into your racing club, knowing that your bird beat out a thousand others because you put in the time, bred it right, fed it right, and trained it right, well, few things compare."

But the Main Event was nearly a year off. First Orlando would spend an anxious year earnestly preparing for the big race. Orlando had won it once before, and consequently, he had a lot at stake this time around, including his cocky reputation.

These were my first steps into the pigeon universe and its shaggy patchwork of obsessive subcultures. As I've journeyed through the world of pigeons, I've found that this seemingly unremarkable bird routinely evokes remarkably strong reactions. While most animals trigger universally similar emotions—puppies are "cute and cuddly"; cockroaches are "disgusting"—the pigeon somehow spans both extremes.

No animal, I discovered, has developed as unique and continuous a relationship with humans as the common

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pigeon. Nor is there any animal that possesses such an unusual array of innate abilities seemingly designed for our utilization.

The fanatical hatred of pigeons is actually a relatively new phenomenon. Far from being reviled, pigeons have been revered for thousands of years. After all, whom do we celebrate as Noah's most loyal passenger if not the white dove bearing an olive branch and bringing hope? ("Pigeon" is merely a French translation of the English "dove.") Although now scorned, those so-called filthy and annoying pigeons in your local park have an unparalleled history and an unmatched intelligence.

Consider this:

They've been worshipped as fertility goddesses, representations of the Christian Holy Ghost, and symbols of peace;

They've been domesticated since the dawn of man and utilized by every major historical superpower from ancient Egypt to the United States of America;

It was a pigeon that delivered the results of the first Olympics in 776 B.C. and a pigeon that first brought news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo over twenty-five hundred years later;

Nearly a million pigeons served in both world wars and are credited with saving thousands of soldiers' lives;

And although it is often overlooked, it was upon the backs of pigeons that Darwin heavily relied to support his theory of evolution.

Pigeons are athletes of the highest caliber. While racehorses 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 five hun-

dred 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 for food or water.

Pigeon racing is an internationally popular sport that counts the queen of England among its enthusiasts. Winning birds can bring home millions of dollars in prize money and fetch tens of thousands of dollars at auction.

Then there's the bird's culinary reputation as one of the world's finest meats—the milk-fed veal of the sky—treasured by chefs the world over and served nice and rare at many of the finest restaurants.

Although we all share a universal bond with this ubiquitous bird, there are some of us whose lives revolve around the pigeon in more profound—and often humorous—ways. I met trainers who ran around their backyards with whistles in tow, barking orders at their racing pigeons as if conditioning a team of professional soccer players; militant members of a New York City pigeon underground who prowl city streets in search of pigeon poachers; and backyard geneticists who toyed with the cellular composition of pigeons, in their quest to create a bird more akin to a Dresden figurine than a child of nature. I was fascinated by their obsession with what I believed to be a scruffy looking bird with a brain the size of a lima bean.

For better or worse, the lives of man and pigeon are inexorably intertwined. Like dogs and cats, they are a product of our own domestication and follow us wherever we go. From a farmer's fertile fields to an urbanite's concrete cities, the pigeon is our constant and inescapable companion. Wherever humans go, they're likely to find a flock of pigeons loafing nearby.

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Frankly, I didn't know chicken scratch about pigeons when I started this book—I mistook the call of a mourning dove for an owl because it went “who, who, who.” My quest for all things pigeon was surprisingly peripatetic and landed me in a variety of unusual situations. I found myself hesitantly scaling the dung-riddled walls of a medieval English dovecote; eating tacos outside a Phoenix “titty bar” in the hopes of scoring an interview with pigeon enthusiast Mike Tyson; and blasting away at live pigeons with a hefty shotgun in a Pennsylvania sportsmen's club.

And yet, until I accidentally stumbled into the passionate world of pigeons, I barely noticed them. Like many urban dwellers, I viewed pigeons as just another fact of city life—so common, so ubiquitous—that I often looked right past them.

The domestic pigeon lives both in the relative luxury of the queen of England's racing lofts and feeds off discarded pizza crusts and doughnuts on the streets of New York City. They are both descendants of *Columba livia*, the rock dove. Very loosely translated, the Latin name means a “leaden-colored bird that bobs its head.” The rock dove (the name “rock pigeon” is becoming increasingly popular among ornithologists) is a member of the family *Columbidae*. Other members of this family include the mourning dove, the turtle dove, the wood pigeon, and the ill-fated passenger pigeon. If you trace your finger a little further back along this family tree, you'll see that the rock dove is even related to the extinct dodo bird.

All members of *Columbidae* share several distinct attributes. They generally have plump bodies, small (often

bobbing) heads, and stubby legs, as well as short slender bills with a fleshy covering, or “cere.” All of these birds make distinctive cooing sounds, live in loosely constructed nests, and lay two white eggs at a time that are incubated by both parents. Both sexes also produce a milklike substance in their throat, or “crop,” which they feed to their newborns. While all other birds collect water in their beaks and tip their heads back to drink, pigeons suck their water like a horse at a trough.

Although a pigeon and a dove are the same bird, the more delicate members of the family are called doves, while the seemingly less graceful members of *Columbidae* are also called pigeons, hence the old adage that all pigeons are doves but not all doves are pigeons. “Dove” has come to mean petite and pure. Colloquial usage of the word “pigeon,” on the other hand, emphasizes the bird’s docile nature and places it in a negative light. “Stool pigeon” is synonymous with stooge, and to be “pigeonholed” is to be arbitrarily stereotyped in a disparaging manner. Pigeons themselves, it would seem, have been pigeonholed as dim-witted. Such is the linguistic discrimination that a large pigeon will nevertheless be called a dove simply because it is white. This lack of pigment is often confused for virtuousness—a characteristic that few are willing to link with an ordinary pigeon. Perhaps we can pin the linguistic confusion on William the Conqueror, whose Norman victory at the Battle of Hastings ensured that the English language would be peppered with French synonyms.

Despite this linguistic bias, the unassuming pigeon is truly special. It doesn’t live in trees but prefers nesting on rocky ledges (although a window ledge will do just fine). And unlike its distant relations, it will never abandon

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its nest, developing a keen sense of homing to ensure its return. It breeds enthusiastically in captivity and is naturally gregarious, enjoying the company of its own kind, even in close quarters. In the wild, a pigeon lives only about three or four years. But in the relative safety of captivity, a pigeon can live over twenty years.

With hollow bones containing reservoirs of oxygen, a tapered fuselage, giant breast muscles that account for one third of its body mass, and an ability to function indefinitely without sleep, the rock dove is a feathered rocket built for speed and endurance. If an average up-and-down of the wing takes a bird three feet, then a racer is making roughly 900,000 of those motions during a long-distance race, while maintaining 600 heartbeats per minute—triple its resting heart rate. The rock dove can reach peak velocity in seconds and maintain it for hours on end. One pigeon was recorded flying for several hours at 110 mph—an Olympian feat by any measure. Clearly these birds aren't designed to jump around branches or glide on warm air currents; they're designed for rapid yet sustained flight. Their fuel? Richly oxygenated blood, just one ounce of birdseed a day, and a hardwired need to return home.

Athletic prowess aside, *Columba livia* is also an inexplicably obliging bird and incredibly easy to domesticate. If you hold one in your hands, it won't struggle or bite. And if you let one go, it will always return home. It is these qualities that have led to the rock dove's unique and unrivaled relationship with humans, making it the world's first domesticated bird.

Cultural reminders of this connection are abundant. The bird's holographic form graces many of our credit cards. Its outline is used to sell soap, chocolate,

greeting cards, and world peace. Rock doves have graced films: Marlon Brando found solace caring for them in *On the Waterfront*, and “Mr. Smith” even brought his pigeons with him to Washington. For years, dramatically circling pigeons were a celebrated attraction at Walt Disney World. Picasso painted them frequently and named his daughter Paloma—Spanish for pigeon.

The rock dove has been our companion for thousands of years. Like most birds, the pigeon is basically a feathered reptilian dinosaur and has roamed the earth in one form or another for over 30 million years. By comparison, we’ve been walking about for a mere 130,000 years.

As a particularly successful species, the rock dove has come to populate every continent on earth, with the exception of Antarctica. In the early 1600s, French settlers imported the rock dove to the New World for meat. Now they populate nearly every city in the Western Hemisphere, from the arid deserts of Arizona to the frigid climes of Alaska. The pigeon does not migrate but rather adapts to its chosen location year-round.

Fossil evidence suggests that the pigeon originated in southern Asia and made its way across northern Africa and Europe, much like the Muslim conquerors and the Mongol hordes of yore. Skeletal remains found in Israel confirm the rock dove’s existence there for at least three hundred thousand years.

When did human fascination with the pigeon arise? Most likely with our earliest days as cavemen. Although the rock dove generally prefers sea cliffs with protective ledges, it probably made itself at home in the outer nooks and crannies of our shallow caves and then scavenged for

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our crumbs. It's also quite likely that humans ate the tasty little bird whenever possible.

This somewhat symbiotic relationship progressed along with human civilization. As we learned to domesticate grains and cereals, we inadvertently domesticated the pigeon as well. As any farmer knows, a small portion of every crop never makes it to the granary. Rather, bits and pieces of it spill to the ground during harvest. These leftovers make for easy pigeon pickings. Crevices in our mud and stone farmhouses also made for good nesting places. It could be said that the pigeon domesticated itself and humans merely met it halfway, often with a healthy appetite.

Research suggests that the pigeon was domesticated perhaps as early as ten thousand years ago, not long after we tamed our other "best friend," the dog. While the bird remains somewhat cautious, it is inherently unafraid of humans. As anyone who has befriended a pigeon will tell you, it doesn't take much effort to train the bird to eat out of your hand. In fact, a pigeon will happily walk through your front door if it knows there is birdseed inside. Conversely, given that pigeons can be bred all year long and are naturally docile, they were ideally suited to become a domesticated food source.

Eventually, early humans built homes for their pigeons, called dovecotes, and harvested the bird for food on a regular basis. They were crude structures at first, but by the late Middle Ages, dovecotes were built with great architectural flourish. Thousands of these spectacular dovecotes still dot the European countryside, often attached to country manor houses and estates.

The vast majority of today's feral pigeons can be traced to the proliferation of these dovecotes across Eurasia.

Wealthy Romans were particularly fond of pigeon meat, so dovecotes were introduced throughout their empire (as were garlic, asparagus, and other delicacies). Since dovecotes are designed to allow pigeons to come and go as they please, some pigeons inevitably wandered off. Roman buildings and monuments were also populated with feral pigeons, much like the pigeons of St. Mark's Square in Venice and London's Trafalgar Square today.

Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets mention the domestication of pigeons over five thousand years ago, as do Egyptian hieroglyphics. In human terms, the pigeon's most useful skill—its innate ability to “home”—was perhaps first recognized and utilized by ancient Mediterranean seafarers. Although the bird often dwells on coastal cliffs, it has an aversion to large bodies of water and always flies inland in search of food. A bird released from a ship will quickly orient itself to land, and early sailors undoubtedly followed suit.

It was only a matter of time before humans learned to further manipulate the bird's homing skills and use them for delivering messages. Egyptians may have been the first to use pigeons as carriers when they sent birds in the four cardinal directions to announce the ascension of a new pharaoh to the throne. Likewise, messages regarding flood levels were sent up and down the Nile by means of an early pigeon post. King Solomon is said to have made use of a pigeon post for critical messaging, and archaeologists have found underground pigeon coops in Israel from this period that held an estimated 120,000 birds.

By the eighth century B.C., pigeons were used regularly by the Greeks to carry messages, particularly results of the Olympic games to the various city-states. As

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impractical as the use of birds in relaying messages may sound, consider the alternative. According to Greek legend, it took most of a day for the news of the Persian defeat at Marathon to reach Athens—a mere 26.2 miles—and then the runner died from exhaustion.

By 500 B.C., the emperor of China was regularly receiving messages in Beijing from outer provinces. A bird could deliver a message in as many hours as it took a horse and rider days. Hannibal employed pigeons during his siege of Rome, and Julius Caesar utilized them to relay messages from his military campaigns in Gaul. Genghis Khan and his grandson Kublai Khan created a pigeon post that spanned one sixth of the world. For thousands of years, the fastest way to send a message was by pigeon. They were the avian equivalent to today's Fed Ex, and the governments and militaries of every major historical power exploited them as such.

Throughout history, the bird's unusual talents and fecundity earned it respect. But it was probably the bird's affectionate nature that earned it adoration and made it integral to religious worship since the beginnings of human civilization in Mesopotamia.

In many ways, pigeons exhibit the tender traits we most admire in ourselves. The Jewish Bible's Song of Solomon speaks of the bird lovingly, in anthropomorphic terms: "O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely."

When two pigeons court, they link beaks in a manner that looks a lot like kissing. The birds are actually exchanging food. The female playfully places her beak inside the male's beak to signal that she expects the male to care for her and, soon, their children. By accepting the female's beak—and this is where we humans differ—the male is accepting his impending responsibility and not just recreational nookie. When pigeons mate, they mate for life.

The sexual act itself is relatively gentle and completely consensual. A duet of affectionate cooing follows, as well as a careful preening of each other's feathers. In a demonstration of true gender equality, the parents share domestic duties and spend an equal amount of time sitting on the eggs and feeding their young. A happy couple can raise as many as twelve to eighteen babies a year. This cooperative behavior and frequent mating, coupled with the bird's ability to live peacefully in large flocks, led to its reputation for fruitfulness and purity of spirit.

One of the earliest known mother-goddesses was the Sumerian, and later Babylonian, goddess Ishtar, “queen of heaven and earth and of the evening star.” She is often depicted either holding a pigeon or as the winged bird herself. The Phoenician goddess of love and fertility, Astarte, was also symbolically represented as a pigeon, as were the Greek goddess Aphrodite and the Roman goddess Venus.

In the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which predates the Hebrew Bible by hundreds of years, there is also a great flood in which the pigeon plays the role of messenger. The rock dove's message—of subsiding waters and thus new beginnings and new hope—lent the pigeon its role as the bird of peace.

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Although the pigeon was cherished for its innocent and gentle nature, these same attributes caused the bird to bear the brunt of brutal ritual sacrifice in humans' quest for spiritual atonement and divine appeasement. It is recorded that Ramses III offered 57,810 pigeons to the god Ammon at Thebes. Besides a talent for assembly-line slaughter, the offering also reveals an Egyptian knack for domestication.

The Jewish Bible describes the bird as a poor person's offering at the Jerusalem temple. If you couldn't afford a heifer, goat, or lamb, then the sacrifice of two pigeons would do just fine—one for a sin offering, the other for a burnt offering. According to the Gospels, when Mary and Joseph visited the temple after the birth of their son Jesus, they made an offering of pigeons. Thirty-three years later, pigeon sellers were among the vendors that Jesus berated when he marched through the temple.

The Hebrew God nonetheless appreciated the pigeon offerings. In fact, when sealing His covenant with Abraham and his descendants, He specifically asked Abraham to sacrifice (along with a collection of larger domesticated animals) a young pigeon, or squab, particularly prized for its tender flesh, as the baby is eaten before it ever has a chance to spread its tiny wings.

In Christian writings and art, the bird is given the pious honor of symbolically representing the Holy Spirit, in much the same way a guiltless lamb represents Jesus. When the Holy Ghost visits the Virgin Mary to impregnate her, he does so in the form of a pigeon. The bird is often depicted in Christian art as descending from heaven in a bolt of light that ends in Mary's stomach or head.

The pigeon is also present for Jesus' ritual immersion into the river Jordan by John the Baptist. Writes Luke,

“And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.” A pigeon attends Jesus’ crucifixion, perhaps as a reminder that God has not abandoned his son. Muhammad is also said to have been fond of pigeons, and to this day the bird continues to hold a protected place in Islamic society. Chinese society also reveres the pigeon. One tradition, hundreds of years old, celebrates the bird in a most unusual manner: intricately carved gourds are attached to specially trained pigeons. The gourds act as whistles of varying octaves and notes, playing music as the birds circle above.

Throughout history, the bird has been treasured as a source of companionship (and protein), admired and utilized for its unique navigational and athletic abilities, and even worshipped as a timeless symbol of God’s grace. We release them as offerings of hope at our weddings and civic ceremonies, and as a representation of the soul’s final journey at our funerals. Yet we have brutalized them at the sacrificial altar, slaughtered more than one species to extinction, and continue to heap daily abuse onto the ones still in our midst.

As I threaded my way through the peculiar world of pigeon people, I found this ambivalence magnified. Although I still had no firm opinion on the bird’s place in the avian pantheon, there were plenty of people out there who did. Their minds were made up. Some coddled and preened them; others pulverized them for sport. It was a winter that thrust me onto the front lines of extreme eccentricity and fierce brutality. Like the bird, I was caught in the middle. Passive participation and detached indifference were no longer possible. I would be sucked into the pigeon’s universe in ways that I never could have suspected nor embraced.