

books

In Love. In Flight. In Fall.

Novelist reveals how an airplane disaster changes and challenges the lives of a gay couple

by Tim Miller

Brad Kessler's *Birds in Fall* (Scribner, 2006; \$24 hardcover) is a beautiful, profoundly moving story that explores a group of human beings who gather at the inn of a gay couple after a terrible crash of a passenger jet into the sea nearby.

The book takes on the deepest mysteries of death and love and offers a wise and rooted way of being with these ancient mysteries in all their splendor and sorrow. As a notoriously nervous flyer, I approached with great anxiousness the opening section detailing the experience of the plane crash, but I was so struck how totally Kessler avoids the ghoulish potential of that terrible moment and instead finds such specific human details, revelation even, of the passengers at the end of their lives. The emotional wallop of the loss sneaks up on us throughout the whole book as the gay men at the center of the inn, which has welcomed the loved ones of the passengers who died in the crash, are changed and challenged by the enormity of this event.

The book is so full of shape shifting, metamorphosis and transmigration. It deftly shifts by narrators, almost as if the "flock" of mourners perched in the inn on the island is the authorial voice and slowly finding a collective path. The first chapters effortlessly move from one voice to the other and create a wing that the rest of the book flies on. Kessler writes: "How is a story like a bird? It keeps us aloft. It flies." The space of the house is so rich and contained: one moment Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain, the next a halfway house—literally halfway between the two worlds of life and death. This is the space where *Birds in Fall* most amazingly triumphs.

I read *Birds in Fall* with that totally bonding, obsessed, feverish urgency that I seek out—where the world of the book becomes so compelling I can't stop being with the characters and the spaces they inhabit. The book deepened my sense of life and death and love. There is no higher praise I could imagine. I spoke with Kessler recently about his remarkable new novel.

Tim Miller: You begin your novel with an airplane disaster killing all on board—based on the 1998 crash of SwissAir Flight 111 off the coast of Nova Scotia. This leads the family and loved ones

of the lost passengers to the inn of a gay couple near the crash site. How did the real air tragedy inform your novel?

Brad Kessler: I had a friend who died on that SwissAir flight. For months they searched the sea for him, until they found a fragment large enough for a positive identification. There was something terrible and haunting about that waiting period, that limbo state before they could officially pronounce him dead. A lot of people lived through that harrowing time. During it, everyone in Nova Scotia dropped what they were doing to help these families. That's what partly inspired the novel—complete strangers assisting other strangers from around the world.

TM: Why choose to have a gay couple as the keepers of this charged space?

BK: It was never a conscious decision to have a gay protagonist. Kevin, the innkeeper, was initially a rather minor character. But as the novel evolved, he quickly became the pole star around which all the others orbited. His sexuality was never a big deal to me. The fact that he and Douglas were gay seemed secondary to who they were as people—straight or gay or in between. That said, Kevin is an outsider. He's a philosopher, he gardens, and he likes to cook. As such, I identified with

him. What Flaubert said of his Emma Bovary, I could say of Kevin Gears—Kevin c'est moi.

TM: But you are a straight man married to a woman.

BK: Yes. And I wouldn't pretend to be anything otherwise. But how stifling these categories can be! How they narrow us to near nothing! The wonderful thing about writing fiction is that, if you are honest enough and empathetic enough, you can slip into the skins of people who are not you. In some sense you're forced to get in touch with those sides of yourself—even sexual sides—that don't define you but lurk there nonetheless. Each time you write another character, you're essentially asked to cross-dress.

TM: And yet there are things that Kevin Gears knows because he is a gay man.

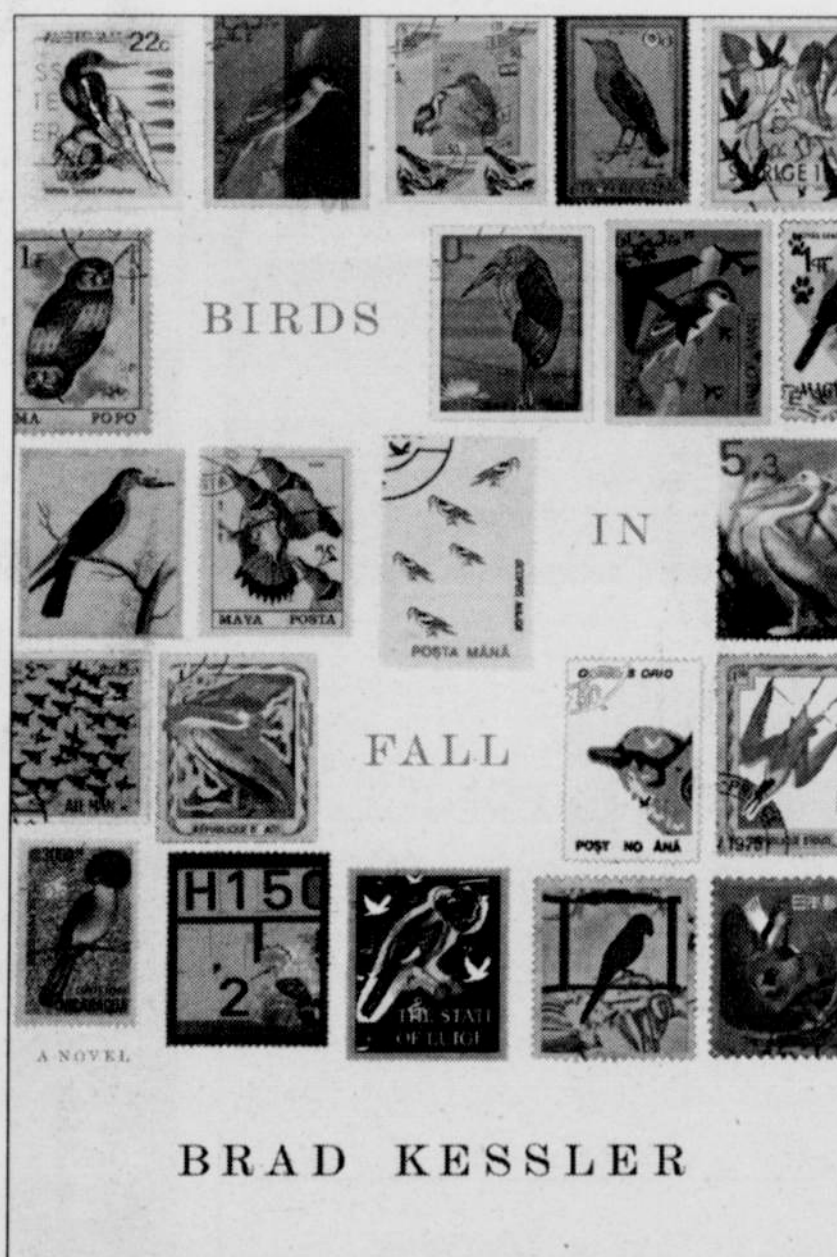
BK: That's true. My Kevin lived through the AIDS epidemic in the '80s in New York City, and many of his friends died alone in rooms, shunned by the larger culture. The reason he's moved to this isolated island off Nova Scotia is partly to forget all the death he's experienced. And yet, death follows him in the guise of this plane crash. So as a gay man who cared for the dying, he knows first of all how to care for people. He knows how to deal with tragic death; he also knows how to survive. Yet he also has a certain edge that the others don't, a bit of wry ruefulness: He can't help but compare the ignominious, painful private deaths of his friends to the instantaneous and very public death of the crash victims.

TM: I was so moved by the rich space of love and loss the novel draws us into. I was pulled deeply into my own memories of loss of loved ones to AIDS. I suppose from the ancient myths of Orpheus right up to the movie *Titanic*, this is the core subject of our human tribe. What paths and lessons does your book offer us about living and dying?

BK: Wow. That's a big one. What I can talk about is mythology, because there's a lot of storytelling and mythology that happens in the heart of this novel. The lesson we learn from much of classical myth and the classicists themselves—Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Ovid, Lucretius—is that nothing really dies. It just changes into something else. Though the form of things changes, the essential spirit or soul or essence doesn't really die. Everything is always in a state of becoming—even our own selves. We're all these incredible configurations of carbon and oxygen and hydrogen, and when we die we become just another configuration of the same elements. As Whitman wrote: "If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles." 

BRAD KESSLER reads from *Birds in Fall* 7:30 p.m. June 27 at Powell's, 1005 W. Burnside St.

TIM MILLER is a solo performer and the author of the books *Shirts & Skin*, *Body Blows* and *1001 Beds*. He can be reached at his Web site hometown.aol.com/millertale.



Brad Kessler was inspired to write *Birds in Fall* after a friend died in the 1998 crash of SwissAir Flight 111 off the coast of Nova Scotia.

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