

## Book Reviews for *This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon*

“John James Audubon’s 1838 masterpiece, *The Birds of America*, ‘marked the beginning of modern ornithology,’ and this volume dramatizes the life and times of the man who devoted his life to creating it.

Audubon’s life was a high-risk adventure story set in the early days of the United States, when Lewis and Clark had completed their explorations, settlers were beginning to head west, and the Trail of Tears—witnessed by Audubon—was an American tragedy. Audubon suffered the deaths of two baby girls and business failures and he put his marriage at risk to do what he loved more than anything—tramp across the country and paint birds. In an age before photography, he created detailed, lifelike paintings of 489 species of birds, each bird looking real enough to ‘hop off the page and fly away.’ The beautifully designed volume includes many reproductions of Audubon’s paintings, from the owls on the cover to the many full-page, full-color interior illustrations. Though occasionally florid, Plain’s writing—drawing largely on Audubon’s own—is lively and colorful, perfect for describing the swamps, forest, rivers, and prairies Audubon so loved. Like Audubon’s paintings, this volume ‘glow[s] with life.’

**A superb introduction to the life and times of a great American artist and naturalist. (appendix, glossary, source notes, bibliography, illustration credits, index) (Biography. 9-14)**

--Kirkus starred review



“Raised in wealth and privilege in France, 18-year-old Jean-Jacques Audubon was sent by his father to America to avoid service in Napoleon’s army. When he arrived in his adopted country, he already loved searching for birds and sketching them but was dissatisfied with his drawings. Over the next few years, he honed his skills as both naturalist and artist—he also married, moved to the frontier, and lost his fortune. At 36, he began the ambitious project of creating *The Birds of America*, the monumental book that would establish his lasting reputation as an ornithologist and artist. Plain chronicles Audubon’s adventurous life in a succinct, absorbing narrative that is well researched, meticulously documented, and beautifully written. The excellent color illustrations include photos and sketches as well as many paintings. Quotes from Audubon’s writings add his lively voice to the narrative, and he emerges as a complex figure struggling, with little success, to balance his love of nature, adventure, and family. Plain also clearly explains why Audubon’s bird illustrations were groundbreaking in their time and are still admired today. Insightful background reading for fans of Gary D. Schmidt’s novel *Okay for Now* (2011), this biography offers a vivid introduction to Audubon’s life and work.”

--Carolyn Phelan, *Booklist* starred review



# NANCY PLAIN

AWARD - WINNING NONFICTION FOR YOUNG READERS

“In this marvelous biography for teens, Nancy Plain brings John James Audubon to life. Audubon was a pioneering naturalist, an adventurer in a country with vast regions still unmapped. Life was not easy in the early 1800s, and he endured business failures and the death of two of his children shortly after their births. Despite these losses, he found solace in the act of painting birds and was drawn again and again into the natural world. Complimenting Plain’s engaging story are paintings by the master himself. Full color reproductions of Audubon’s famous art work are found on almost every other page. From start to finish, this is a fascinating glimpse of a great American naturalist.”

--The National Outdoor Book Awards Foundation, Inc. ★

“And now it is summer, and the days are longer and lighter, and birds are thinking about doing what birds do—building nests, laying eggs, cheeping outside your window at the ungodly hour of 5 a.m. A good time, perhaps, to read Nancy Plain’s short and lovely biography of American ornithologist John James Audubon, *This Strange Wilderness* (University of Nebraska Press, \$19.95, 136 pages).

Plain draws on Audubon’s writings and fantastic tales of adventure (true? some? maybe?) as he crisscrossed America, shooting the birds he loved so he could paint them accurately, annoying his various employers, making enemies, missing his family.

Despite often painting from posed dead birds, Audubon (1785-1851) breathed life and movement into his paintings, depicting his birds in action—a wild turkey hurrying her poults along a path, a swirling hawk threatening a cloud of bobwhites, mockingbirds defending their nests from a rattlesnake.

For the mockingbird painting, Audubon posed a dead rattlesnake that was 6 feet long. He found he was unable to finish the painting in one sitting, “because the stench became too strong.”

Plain has chosen quirky and interesting snippets of Audubon’s life, nicely illustrated with 44 color plates, for this readable and fascinating little book.”

--Laurie Hertzler, *Minneapolis Star Tribune* ★

“Two salient facts about the famed naturalist and artist John James Audubon come out in Nancy Plain’s vigorous *This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon* (University of Nebraska Press, \$19.95): He was incorrigibly footloose, and he ‘shot thousands of birds in his lifetime.’ Yet Audubon correctly foresaw that their demise would not come from bullets but from loss of habitat as ‘America’s infinite forests fell to the settler’s ax.’ That recognition explains why our foremost conservation group bears the French immigrant’s name. Audubon lived a life of stressful poverty, but his wandering with gun and easel yielded the monumental *The Birds of America*. Meant for younger readers but well suited to grown-ups, *This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon* by Nancy Plain provides readers of all ages a concise introduction to the naturalist’s prophetic role in the establishment of the American conservation movement.”

--TRUE WEST ★

# NANCY PLAIN

AWARD - WINNING NONFICTION FOR YOUNG READERS

“John James Audubon found birds to be ‘the objects of my greatest delight,’ but before he painted them, he shot them—a fact many juvenile writers today would overlook or tone down. Not Nancy Plain. She opens her fascinating account of the hunter-naturalist killing a great blue heron. That’s a bold move for a children’s author, but this is definitely a book children and adults will enjoy. ‘My Work will be *the* Work indeed!’ Audubon (1785-1851) said of *The Birds of America*, his *chef-d-oeuvre*. Plain has written the definitive children’s biography of an American icon.”

--ROUNDUP MAGAZINE ★

“*This Strange Wilderness* is like walking through a secret door into early nineteenth-century America. Nancy Plain’s stellar prose and meticulous research, combined with the glorious paintings of John James Audubon, will delight readers of all ages.”

--Candace Simar, author of the Spur Award winning *Abercrombie Trail* series ★

“Nancy Plain captures the essence of Audubon in words as beautiful and informative as his paintings.”

--Rod Miller, author of *John Muir: Magnificent Tramp* ★

“In this insightful biography, Plain demonstrates how naturalist and artist John James Audubon’s groundbreaking *The Birds of America*, published in England in 1827, rocked the art and science worlds through its depictions of birds in naturalistic poses and in their own habitats. Born in Haiti and raised in France, Audubon (1785-1851) displayed a passion for drawing early on. As an adult, living and working in the United States, he struggled to portray birds realistically, eventually using wires to hold his specimens on boards in lifelike poses. Readers will get a strong sense of how devoted the man was to his cause, often leaving his family to roam the American wilderness hunting birds or to work on his book in England. Through beautifully crafted prose, Plain vividly describes the land Audubon loved, often in his own words, quoted from his letters. Audubon’s stunning artwork is beautifully reproduced and paired with his thoughts on specific illustrations. Readers will also appreciate the inclusion of relevant paintings, photographs, and other images. This narrative of the life of a dedicated and hard-working figure is the story of an amazing individual and a glimpse into the natural history of the early United States. **VERDICT:** An excellent addition to science and biography collections.”

--Frances E. Millhouser, *School Library Journal* ★