



# A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked In

*Magnus Mills*

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## A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked In Magnus Mills

Far away, in the ancient empire of Greater Fallowfields, things are falling apart. The imperial orchestra is presided over by a conductor who has never played a note, the clocks are changed constantly to ensure that the sun always sets at five o' clock, and the Astronomer Royal is only able to use the observatory telescope when he can find a sixpence to put in its slot. But while the kingdom drifts, awaiting the return of the young emperor, who has gone abroad and communicates only by penny post, a sinister and unfamiliar enemy is getting closer and closer...A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked In is Magnus Mills's most ambitious work to date. A surreal portrait of a world that, although strange and distant, contains rather too many similarities to our own for the alien not to become brilliantly familiar and disturbingly close to home. It is comic writing at its best - and it is Magnus Mills's most ambitious, enjoyable and rewarding novel to date.

## A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked In Details

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Author : Magnus Mills

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## From Reader Review A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked In for online ebook

### Gem says

I don't quite know what to think of this. At first, I was really enjoying it - I loved the quirkiness, the quaintness. But the further in I read, the more I felt I was missing out. Was it all a subtle "dig" at something? (Or not so subtle - and I'm just not getting it at all.) Why were they all named after birds?

Frustrating me further was the ending: nothing felt resolved. I came away thinking 'Well, that was all very nice, but what did any of it mean?' Where was the emperor? What was the point of the players? Why did Mills spend all this time getting the narrator to the City of Scoffers, to undo it all in a blink of an eye?

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### Derek says

Everyone should be made to read Magnus Mills. The man is a genius. And that's all I have to say, really. Do yourself a favour and check out not only this book, but all of his back catalog.

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### B-zee says

Seperti sudah saya koar-koarkan di media lain, saya membeli buku ini murni karena covernya (dan murah). Belum pernah kenal dengan penulisnya, apalagi dengar tentang buku ini. Dan ternyata cukup menyenangkan.

Buku ini berkisah tentang sebuah kerajaan yang rajanya absen untuk sementara waktu. Kabinet tetap bekerja, tetapi tanpa adanya raja, banyak hal menjadi salah. Lalu, satu per satu rahasia terkuak, dan masalah menjadi semakin rumit.

Dikisahkan dari sudut pandang seorang menteri yang, bisa saya bilang, polos. Namun, rasanya kepolosan dan kenaifan itu adalah karakteristik semua orang di negeri itu, akibat dari kerajaan yang 'terisolasi', yang merasa diri mereka besar dan kuat, yang hidup dalam kesenangan dan ketenangan. Hingga saat ada pihak luar yang masuk, mereka menyadari kekurangan diri mereka.

Karena belum pernah mendengar tentang ini, saya agak sulit masuk ke dalam dunia dalam buku ini. Bukan karena deskripsinya yang kurang, tetapi lebih karena pembaca diberi kesempatan untuk membayangkannya sendiri. Saya tidak punya bayangan ataupun referensi sebelumnya, jadi saya masih berpikir apakah ini fantasi, sejarah, atau distopia. Dan ternyata penulis punya cara sendiri untuk membangun dunia fiksi yang berbeda.

Secara keseluruhan, membaca buku ini seperti sebuah perjalanan dengan kereta di malam hari, berliku, tanpa tahu sudah sampai di mana dan kapan akan tiba, kecuali ketika sudah singgah di stasiun. Perjalanan yang menyenangkan, dengan humor yang polos, konflik mulai dari yang remeh sampai pelik, tapi menyimpan segudang sindiran untuk diinterpretasikan, terutama masalah politik dan sosial.

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## Ian White says

Absolutely wonderful, among his very best. This is one of his more overtly fantastical novels, in the sense of an outlandish setting, like *Three To See The King and Explorers of the New Century*, but really making distinctions between degrees of realism is meaningless when it comes to *Magnus Mills*. Whether it's a broadly realistic mundane subject such as bus drivers or high-tensile fencing, or a fantasy kingdom or talking 'mules', everything is rendered in the same ultra-stylised super-mundane minimalist dry style, with no variation in tone whatsoever. I can see why some people might find Mills' books infuriating and often baffling, but I love everything about them: the pointless arguments about petty procedural details, the deliberate banality, the repetition, the dryer than dry sense of humor, the vague hints of menace and sinister things lurking in the background. This may not make them sound much fun, but I find them incredibly absorbing and easy to read.

*A Cruel Bird...* is in many ways more expansive than many Mills novels, and seems to be stretching towards some kind of political metaphor, but his natural reticence keeps everything reliably vague, leaving the reader to fill in the huge blanks, and avoiding any obvious conclusions in terms of plot or theme. The book revolves as usual around work and routine, building up through repetition an accumulation of tiny details that coalesce into something like a plot. The Kafka parallels are prominent here with the nightmare logic of the economy and the absent emperor and unenterable pub hinting at the Castle.

Mills' style has been fully-realised since his very first book (*The Restraint of Beasts*), and it is in the tiny refinements of it book by book, as he obsessively chips away at his pet themes and subjects, that much of the pleasure of each new novel is derived from. *A Cruel Bird...* is simultaneously exactly the same as every other Magnus Mills novel and a considerable departure from all that has come before, if such a thing is possible, and it is brilliant.

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## Elise says

Clever title and thesis statement (to mock colonialism through a fictionalized Great Britain named Greater Fallowfields), but other than that, there were very few redeeming qualities of this one. The characters are not well developed (which may have been intentional, but it made for an unsatisfying reading experience nonetheless), and setting was almost nonexistent. I was so very disappointed in this book, because it was hailed by critics as a "Kafkaesque fairytale," and that could not be further from the truth. The only feature Mills takes from Kafka is social criticism, but here we have social criticism done poorly. Imagine Kafka trying to be cheerful by milking the same joke again and again and again...ad nauseum, and there you have "A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked in." I will admit that I liked Mills making fun of the pomposity of daylight savings time, and the fact that almost everything England is known for was stolen from some other culture (usually a British colony), but these are hardly fresh observations. I went through a great deal of trouble to get this book because it wasn't at our public library (which has \*everything\*), and I had to wait for it to come all the way from England. I suppose the public library was trying to protect us from it. Next time I will heed their warning. The only reason I finished this one so quickly is because I couldn't wait to get it over with, and because I actually bought it. I wish I hadn't wasted the money.

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## Justin says

Magnus is on top form with this surreal political tale

### **Noa says**

I was prepared to plough through this one but I didn't need to. It was a funny, savvy, witty read that was quick and surprisingly easy. At points it balanced the edge of boredom and lengthiness, but overall I enjoyed it. I think you have to be in the right headspace for it; it's really funny when you see the parallels with the British Empire and the stuffiness of politics. Sometimes it was less funny - the only females mentioned in the book were the absent, never specified "dancing girls grown big with child", which is a rather poignant and painful way of summarising the role of women in western politics throughout history. Glad I read it, not life-changing.

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### **Chalice An says**

Liked most things about it but definitely not the ending. What exactly happened? And how would that help anything? Left me rather bemused.

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### **Gumble's Yard says**

Slightly less straightforward Mills book more of his allegorical type. Interestingly set among the elite of a society rather than the workers although the same Kafkaesque feeling of being a pawn in a larger game applies and there are workers involved (particularly the orchestra). As enjoyable as all his books with the absurdity making it a better read than some of his more mundane novels.

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### **Terri says**

Kind of, but not quite, like a Phantom Tollbooth for adults.

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### **Steve says**

*Standing up in the style of Bruno Tonioli.....MAGNUS!* You little political tease you... Greater Fallowfields... the decline and fall of the British Empire slowly swallowed surreptitiously by the onward march of Eastern promise despite the anodyne support from the Wild West never looked better! Ooh. The cruel bird looking into the nest at the malnourished chicks, just one thing, you have to focus all the way to the end, keep it going, point the toes and drive. Loved it!

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## Nastya Khyzhniak says

The clock struck ten, somebody opened the register. The same list of the people with grand titles, but with otherwise quite indistinguishable names (for the first part for sure). Among them, our eyes and ears are - the narrator whose name we won't learn even by following him closely. He strikes as a smart person, willing to do the right thing, but for some reason not doing it. Here I was taking him to be the smartest person in the room, but only until says or does something stupid or fails to perform his duties or naively expects that everything will resolve itself.

Don't know whether I haven't imagined all the allegories and hints towards The Great Britain (Great Fallowfields) with its glorious command of the sea and The USA (SoC) that offers wonderful technical progress, but not so much real human connection (and, well, numbered streets).

Burocrasy settles comfortably among the members of the cabinet and rules in the name of the law and twisted logic. It follows the narrator in the time of crisis to SoC. If you ever had to obtain a visa (travel permit, as they call it) you find this small part quite amusing.

Oh, and let the King join the meeting. A Player King, to be exact. But weren't we always told that the monarchs play a mostly ceremonial role anyway? And who can better play it than an actor?

A bit disappointing is the end, though. It's almost like Magnus Mills abandoned its path, forgot all the laws of twisted logic and just run out of words. At the other hand, it probably shows us that nothing really changes - there might be new names or new posts, but it's same old, same old.

P.S. I was trying to find (unsuccessfully) the reason for so many bird names in the text - maybe you know it? Though, it's quite amusing if you know French: "les noms d'oiseau" is a polite way to say "insult"

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## Meredith M says

I chose this book perusing the shelves to find an author with the same initials as me as part of a reading challenge. Cool name, great cover.

I found myself struggling to remember who is who with the characters and when I went to look them up to give me reference 4 chapters in, realised I had read a Magnus Mills book before – The Maintenance of Headway. I remembered parts of the story and writing immediately; and the feeling of irritation I had at the ultimate futility behind the story. I recalled appreciating the quirkiness and absurdity but ultimately felt something missing or, at least, something I didn't connect with. I suddenly found myself with mixed feelings about the new M.M journey I had embarked on and sought solace/comfort/encouragement in past reviews.

In relation to this book, one Mills fan stated: "I can see why some people might find Mills' books infuriating and often baffling". I get the amusement in "the pointless arguments about petty procedural details, the deliberate banality" but I must say I found "infuriating and often baffling" an apt reflection of my prior experience, similarly another review citing "frustrating inscrutability". With another review reminding me that it is "par for the course" to "land in the story" with this author, I am encouraged to continue to chapter 5.

For the remainder of the book, I didn't feel quite as infuriated at feeling baffled and maybe not so baffled either.

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## Andy Weston says

I do enjoy Magnus Mills, most of all *The Restraint of Beasts* and *All Quiet on the Orient Express*. This is more in the mold of *The Field of The Cloth of Gold*, filled with parody and strangeness.

The story is narrated by an unnamed man who has just been appointed the Principal Composer to the Imperial Court Greater Fallowfields by the strangely absent Emperor, never mind that he has no training in music. He joins the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Postmaster General, the Astronomer General, the Comptroller for the Admiralty, the Surveyor of Imperial Works, the Pellitory-of-the-Wall, and the Librarian-in-Chief, as the cabinet to the "His Exalted Highness, the Majestic Emperor of the Realms, Dominions, Colonies and Commonwealth of Greater Fallowfield." The story centres on the days leading up to the "Twelve-Day Feast," when it becomes evident that not all is well in the surrounding realms, as a group of traveling players bring ill rumors, and someone appears to be building a railroad headed straight for the imperial capital. There is even more of the usual Mills oddness which is the great attraction of his work, such as the orchestra of serfs which spends hours each day playing only the national anthem, or the "stipendary" sixpence each cabinet member receives once a week, but which is not accepted anywhere in the city.

Wonderful stuff.

I do have a question though for Mr Mills, or any other readers who may have an opinion. Why are there no women in the novel? It must be rare for that to be the case, and looking at a few of the reviews here, it hasn't been mentioned.

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## Alan says

Another dry, funny, wonky piece from Mills, this time set in a fictional empire, with similarities to Britain (sixpence so, half crowns; stiff with meaningless ritual and pomp), and a missing emperor. This is my fourth Mills and all the others I gave 4stars, but I think this one came across as a little forced, or maybe I'm too used to his style now and the surprises are less.

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## Kris McCracken says

Set in the Empire of Greater Fallowfields, once a mighty seafaring power, the novel finds the reader encountering a court that nurses memories of imperial glory and sustains only the vaguest awareness of the lands that surround it. A feudal system remains in place and our central character is the unnamed 'Principal Composer to the Imperial Court' – who cannot read or play a note – which affords us a privileged insight into the inner workings of the cabinet, which is preoccupied by the prolonged absence of 'His Exalted Highness, the Majestic Emperor of the Realms, Dominions, Colonies and Commonwealth of Greater Fallowfields'.

As with all of the Mills oeuvre, this is an odd little book. Greater Fallowfields is a whimsical little place populated by simpleminded folk out of tune with the rest of the world. Think Kafka blended with Andrey Kurkov. I am sure that the peculiar tone of the piece will annoy many readers; I don't mind it but will confess that at times I struggle to concentrate on the narrative as the story slowly drifted on.

It is not the greatest thing ever written, and the ending was a little hasty for my liking; but ultimately this is a

book with an odd sort of charm. If you're looking for a very 'British' kind of writer, Mills is not your man. More Central European in tone, I find his eccentricities endearing rather than maddening. I suspect that many could go either way. Recommended.

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## Tony says

I adore Mills' first two books (*The Restraint of Beasts* and *All Quiet on the Orient Express*) and now religiously pick up every new book he writes. I have to say that nothing he's written since (including this book) has hit me as hard as those first two, but he is such a distinctive writer that I'm always glad to have the chance to peek into his world. It's a world like ours, but with a fairy tale or fable style, stripped down and with minimal detail. Even the language is simplified, to the point where a child could quite easily read it. But behind it all is the message of a satirist -- although what that message precisely is, Mills is far too canny to explicitly state.

The story is narrated by an unnamed man who has just been appointed by royal decree to be the Principal Composer to the Imperial Court Greater Fallowfields, never mind that he has no training in music whatsoever. He joins the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Postmaster General, the Astronomer General, the Comptroller for the Admiralty, the Surveyor of Imperial Works, the Pellitory-of-the-Wall, and the Librarian-in-Chief, as the cabinet to the "His Exalted Highness, the Majestic Emperor of the Realms, Dominions, Colonies and Commonwealth of Greater Fallowfields." Unfortunately, his majesty is entirely absent, and in the absence of the emperor, the cabinet must keep Fallowfields running smoothly. However, in the days leading up to the "Twelve-Day Feast," it becomes evident that not all is well in the surrounding realms, as a group of traveling players bring ill rumors, and someone appears to be building a railroad headed straight for the imperial capital. Amidst all this is the usual Millsian oddness -- such as the orchestra of serfs which spends hours each day playing only the national anthem, or the "stipendary" sixpence each cabinet member receives once a week, but which is not accepted at either the candyshop or the tavern, and so forth.

It is exceedingly tempting (and possibly correct) to read the story as a fable about England ("Fallowfields" certainly invokes a kind of nostalgic Albion, a name that would be a good fit in Tolkien's own Shires, and there's a passage about street names that appears to be a thinly veiled allusion to London) resting on its historic laurels and sinking under absurd policy choices while the brutal efficiency of the City of Scoffers (China?) closes in from the east, and from the west a fleet arrives bearing men claiming to be "cousins" of the people of Fallowfields (and who are "earnest" and "swagger" and speak in superlatives, and thus appear to be Americans) offering salvation from the City of Scoffers. However, I'd be hesitant to extend the potential parallels our own world any further than that. For example, the imperial orchestra and its lead violinist play a large role in the book, but I have no idea where they fit into a larger interpretation. Or what is one to make of the schemers who forge imperial decrees for their own comfort? Or the role of the "Player King" and his traveling troupe of actors? Or that the characters all bear the names of various kinds of birds?

Personally, I didn't need answers to all these questions in order to enjoy the book, but I do wish the ending had been a little less abrupt. Unlike the rest of the book, which unwinds at a leisurely pace, it felt like Mills was in a rush to finish. If you like his other books, you'll probably like this, and if you've never read anything by him, it's as good a place as any to start. Just don't expect any answers... I'd be very curious to see what a filmmaker like Wes Anderson might do with one of Mills's books.

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## Christian Schwoerke says

This is the least of the Mills books I've read, narrated with the same easy-going naivete that slowly builds to a hard and inescapable conclusion. I found the parable here so cluttered with details that it didn't cleanly strike its target.

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## Anna says

'A Cruel Bird Came to the Nest and Looked In' is a whimsical and distinctly allegorical fable with an utterly wonderful title. In places, it reminded me of the Gormenghast trilogy, Michael Frayn's 'The Tin Men', and Kafka's 'Amerika', but possessed a gentleness that none of them have. The novel is set in a declining kingdom and narrated by a man who has arbitrarily been chosen as Principle Composer to the Imperial Court. He has no idea of his duties, but attends cabinet meetings and does his best with good humour. Meanwhile, the emperor has vanished and other kingdoms begin to encroach.

To me the story seemed like an allegory for either the decline of Britain as an imperial power and/or for the industrial revolution's transformation of the traditional guild-based manufacturing economy. Whichever you prefer, it is also a nice satire on inept and outdated bureaucracy. I found it a very easy read, perhaps because of its gentleness. The progression of events held little threat or tension, as the narrator's perspective is so fluffy and unworried. I realise this was a stylistic choice, but I generally prefer a bit more darkness and bite to my satire.

Nonetheless, this book definitely amused me. The character names have a fantastic ring to them, for example Whimbrel, Wryneck, and Garganey. In fact, that's one of the aspects that reminded me of Mervyn Peake. I also loved the fact that the concert hall and home of the orchestra is referred to exclusively as 'the cake'. This results in appealing comments like, 'What I really wanted was to have the cake to myself.'

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## Boyd says

Another work of deadpan surrealism in the classic Magnus Mills mode, but this one fends off comprehension even more successfully than its predecessors. Here Mills is dabbling with multiple allegories, with the Empire of Fallowfields possibly standing in for a prewar, agrarian Britain and the gimlet-eyed imperialists from the gleaming City of Scoffing for everyone's favorite enemies, the Nazis. Meanwhile, on the distant horizon, some sort of ominous natural catastrophe is brewing, a la DeLillo's "airborne toxic event.". Maybe this is a parable about industrialization? Maybe it's a dissection of the class system? The Fallowfields emperor is MIA throughout, but that doesn't stop him from issuing mysterious edicts. Some strolling players wander in and out: what's \*their\* damage, and what about their MacBeth-ish little play? Really, who the hell knows, and coming to the end of the book is not going to help anyone find out.

Which hardly matters, because the pleasures of Mills's work lie elsewhere, particularly in its exquisitely funny, dry-as-a-bone narration. Here is the open plain--or plane--on which Kafka and Beckett rendezvous before dropping by to sit a spell with Calvino. Mills has said he admires Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast trilogy, and Gormenghastian elements are easy to discern. Nevertheless, Magnus Mills is only like himself: a brilliant purveyor of comic unease.

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