

Marlborough Public Library Adult Book Club

March 11 or 13, 2025

*What an Owl Knows* by Jennifer Ackerman

Interview with the author abridged from:

<https://www.bookpage.com/interviews/jennifer-ackerman-interview-what-an-owl-knows/>

**What do you think is the quality that makes humans most intrigued by owls—their wide-eyed cuteness, their perceived wisdom, their air of mystery?**

I would say all of the above! Owls have enchanted humans for tens of thousands of years. We see ourselves in them, with their huge heads and big forward-facing eyes (and yes, their cute faces). And yet they're also so very different from us—strange, mysterious denizens of the dark, capable of flying silently and navigating the night, with sensory powers beyond our own that allow them to hunt in the pitch black. So it's the whole package of mystery, cuteness, extraordinary skills and intelligence that inspires awe and wonder.

**Your earlier books (e.g., *Chance in the House of Fate*, *Ah-Choo!* and *Sex Sleep Eat Drink Dream*) were about humans. In your more recent books, you've turned to birds. What prompted that transition from writing about people to writing about our feathered friends?**

I've loved birds since I was a child. My first book, *Birds by the Shore*, explored the nature of the mid-Atlantic coast, including ospreys and shorebirds. I took a detour into human biology because I was fascinated by the riddle of humanity's place in the natural world. *Chance in the House of Fate* is about the genetic similarities between humans and other organisms, the long thread of DNA that connects us with all living things.

But in 2013, my husband was diagnosed with cancer, and I decided to turn my attention back to nature and to my first love: birds. I'm an avid reader of scientific journals, and I noticed an abundance of new research about the shifting view of bird brains and bird behavior. I got interested in what makes birds tick. How do they communicate? Why do they sing so gloriously? And how do they learn their songs? What's going on in their minds while they forage, build nests, raise their young? How do they make decisions and solve problems? This launched me into *The Genius of Birds* and *The Bird Way*, and from there to owls.