



Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon

Dhan Gopal Mukerji , Boris Artzybasheff (Illustrator)

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Writing out of his own experience as a boy in India, Dhan Gopal Mukerji tells how Gay-Neck's master sent his prized pigeon to serve in World War I, and of how, because of his exceptional training and his brave heart, Gay-Neck served his new masters heroically. Winner of the 1928 Newbery Medal.

Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon Details

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Author : Dhan Gopal Mukerji , Boris Artzybasheff (Illustrator)

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From Reader Review **Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon** for online ebook

Katie says

In *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*, Dhan Gopal Mukerji tells the story of his childhood adventures with his messenger pigeon, Gay-Neck. (Yes, it is quite a name in today's usage. It is a reference to the pigeon's colorful neck, and can also be translated as iridescence-throated.) Mukerji and Gay-Neck have a lot of adventures and scrapes with death in the Himalayas, and Gay-Neck is also sent to France to serve as a messenger pigeon with the army during World War I.

There was a lot I appreciated about this book. It wasn't racist like other early Newbery winners have been. It is by an author of Indian descent and exposes children to Buddhist thought and culture. I liked the fact that Mukerji was a curious and reverent observer of the natural world. There were several quotes I really liked about the awe-inspiring nature of gazing daily upon mountains.

There was also a lot I didn't like about this book. There is a lot of anthropomorphism of which I am not a fan, although I am much more tolerant of it in books written for children. Often, the overly reverent Buddhist language became a bit much for me. Most of the book was actually pretty boring, but at least I didn't actively hate it. (Although actively hating a book can make it more fun to read.)

Wouldn't recommend this Newbery winner.

Wendy says

What a bizarre choice! The reader knows almost nothing about the human narrator and very little about the setting; it really is "the story of a pigeon", but not even an anthropomorphic pigeon, for the most part. It's sort of mesmerizing, and is full of Buddhist wisdom. The story picks up about halfway through, and the episode where the pigeon has post-traumatic-stress disorder is interesting. The illustrations are beautiful.

Ashley says

Originally reviewed on my book blog, [Books from Bleh to Basically Amazing](#)

Although I do really enjoy reading book lists, and various award winners, you can't always trust the committees who pick the books. Sometimes, you get a 'bad' one in the bunch. *Gay-Neck, the Story of a Pigeon* is one such book.

While not a horrid book, *Gay-Neck* is also not a book I would recommend or reread. I picked it up because it is on the Newbery list, and it is one of only two books thus far that I truly disliked. (The other being *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* by Rachel Field.) It's been a little while since I read this one, so my memory of specific details, but the way the book made me feel is still pretty fresh. I was reorganizing my books for storage (sad, I know) and I saw this one, and decided to write my review now and get it over with while I

was thinking about it. ...

The book is about a young boy in India who trains pigeons around the time of World War I. Gay-Neck happens to be one of his prized pigeons. Initially, our narrator is the young boy. Through him, we learn about the training procedures for carrier pigeons and what his life is like. Later in the story however, we get to hear from Gay-Neck himself as he goes off to war and a few other places as well. I have never been a big fan of animals being the ones to tell a story. There are a few exceptions, but for the most part, I rather dislike that.

There wasn't much that I liked about this book. The writing never grabbed me, the story never interested me, and the characters never moved me. I don't know what I'm supposed to feel when a pigeon starts making eyes at this pretty lady pigeon, but I definitely missed that one.

I respect this as an award winner, because there are very few award winners that are so obviously set in, or about other cultures beyond America. Not to say that the book has no merit on its own, but I believe the glimpse into another culture played a large role in earning this book the golden sticker. I can't think of another Newbery book set in India or written by an Indian author right off hand, and it's always nice to be able to add a bit of culture.

Although I wasn't a fan of this book, I can understand why some view it as a distinguished contribution to children's literature, and I've even been told that there are people out there who truly enjoyed this book. I haven't met any yet, but I'll let you know if I do! I think that this is a book with a very limited audience, and sadly, one of the Newbery winners that has not stood the test of time well.

Michael Fitzgerald says

Interesting story that has several parts. Part of the story is told from the viewpoint of the pigeon, with some of the same kind of animal interpretations that are seen in *Bambi: A Life in the Woods*. A lot of the pigeon training stuff is rather mundane, and a little bit of hawk vs. pigeon goes a long way. However, I found a few of the accounts pretty hard to swallow - various strangers remember seeing one particular lost pigeon flying by? The larger theme of the book is about fear, and it's interesting to consider this in light of its interwar publication. Perhaps it had connections with so many WWI soldiers suffering from shell shock.

I liked Artzybasheff's black-and-white illustrations, but not as much as his colorful ones in *Seven Simeons: A Russian Tale*

Kris says

This book was written in 1927 and given a Newbery award in 1928.

Written in the English of a man from India, it details the story of a young Indian boy who owns pigeons. One pigeon in particular, Gay Neck, surfaces as a particularly talented flyer and becomes the prize bird in the young boy's flock.

After being sent to a WWI battle front to be a messenger pigeon, Gay Neck is injured. After completely recovering from his physical injuries, Gay Neck's owner wonders why he won't fly. The young boy, Gay

Neck and a good friend take a trip to the lamasery to learn more about Gay Neck's condition and whether he will ever fly again.

Good story with lots of action and other stories to entertain a reader. I particularly liked the quote at the end of the story:

"Whatever we think and feel will colour what we say or do. He who fears, even unconsciously, or has his least little dream tainted with hate, will inevitably, sooner or later, translate these two qualities into his action. Therefore, my brothers, live courage, breathe courage and give courage. Think and feel love so that you will be able to pour out of yourselves peace and serenity as naturally as a flower gives forth fragrance."
"Peace be unto all!"

Bailey Marissa says

A life story of a carrier pigeon from World War I from the perspective of the pigeon's trainer.

Recommended 10+ for mentions of World War I.

Jill says

The whole time I was reading this book I thought of my niece Amelia saying "The bird nerds would LOVE this!", which is true! maybe not love, but if I didn't like birds the way I do I may not have enjoyed this book as much. I have to say though, of the Newberys about animals and Buddhist philosophy...I'm thinking of The Cat Who Went to Heaven here, this was MUCH better, maybe because this book actually had a plot. The author includes a lot of information about birds and their behavior in a way that is interesting...but I'm a bird nerd so I can't speak for everyone! Also, there was some fascinating information that I did not know about Indian culture and customs and India's WWII involvement in Europe.

On animals:

"He had, attached to his eyelid, another thin lid as delicate as tissue-paper...it was a protective film for the eye that enabled the bird to fly in a dust-storm or straight toward the sun."

"The brooding did for him what cuddling does for human children. It gives the helpless ones warmth and happiness. It is as necessary to them as food."

"I have yet to see a Himalayan eagle that does not sit facing the wind from the time of its birth until it learns to fly, as a sailor boy might sit looking at the sea until he takes to navigating it."

"What a pity that most young people instead of seeing one animal in nature--which is worth a hundred in any zoo--must derive their knowledge of God's creatures from their appearance in prisons! If we cannot perceive any right proportion of man's moral nature by looking at prisoners in a jail, how do we manage to think that we know all about an animal by gazing at him penned in a cage?"

"I am not sorry that the bull died. Better death than to be caged for the rest of his life in a zoo. Real death is preferable to living death."

Other quotes:

"It has been our practise for centuries to pray for all who sleep. At this hour of the night even the insomnia-stricken person finds oblivion; and since men when they sleep cannot possess their conscious thoughts, we pray that Eternal Compassion may purify them, so that when they awake in the morning they will begin their day with thoughts that are pure, kind and brave."

"...no animal, nor any man, is attacked and killed by an enemy until the latter succeeds in frightening him. I have seen even rabbits escape hounds and foxes when they kept themselves free of fear. Fear clouds one's wits and paralyses one's nerve."

"...almost all our troubles come from fear, worry, and hate. If any man catches one of the three, the other two are added unto it. No beast of prey can kill his victim without frightening him first." "...an animal's fear kills it before its enemy gives it the final blow."

"Even there, in that very heart of pounding and shooting, where houses fell as birds' nests in tempests, rats ran from hole to hole, mice stole cheese, and spiders spun webs to catch flies. They went on with the business of their lives as if the slaughtering of men by their brothers were as negligible as the clouds that covered the sky."

"Here in the monastery we have prayed to Infinite Compassion twice every day for the healing of the nations of earth. Yet the war goes on, infecting even the birds and beasts with fear and hate. Diseases of the emotions spread faster than the ills of the body. Mankind is going to be so loaded with fear, hate, suspicion and malice that it will take a whole generation before a new set of people can be reared completely free from them."

"Infinite courage is in all life. Each being that lives and breathes is a reservoir of infinite courage." "He who purifies himself to the greatest extent can put into the world the greatest spiritual force."

"May the north wind bring healing unto you, May the south wind bring healing unto you, May the winds of east and west pour healing into you. Fear flees from you, Hate flees from you, And suspicion flees from you."

"If you take a map of France and draw a line from Calais south almost in a straight line, you will come across a series of places where the British and Indian armies were situated. Near Armentieres there are many graves of Indian Mohammedan soldiers. There are no graves of Indian Hindu soldiers because the Hindus from time immemorial have cremated their dead, and those that are cremated occupy no grave. Their ashes are scattered to the winds, and no place is marked or burdened with their memory."

"The British Government forbids the use of firearms to the common people of India, and so we carried no rifles."

"Whatever we think and feel will colour what we say or do. He who fears, even unconsciously, or has his least little dream tainted with hate, will inevitably, sooner or later, translate these two qualities into his action. Therefore, my brothers, live courage, breathe courage and give courage. Think and feel love so that you will be able to pour out of yourselves peace and serenity as naturally as a flower gives forth fragrance."

Julie says

I have only found an excerpt and I doubt I will ever choose to read more than that excerpt.

Phil Jensen says

This book is a milestone in anyone's life as a reader. Before it, you are one of a multitude. After it, you are one of a select few who have heard about it, sought it out, picked it up, and persisted with it well past the point of enjoyment.

What does this say about you? Obviously, you are attempting to read all the Newbery Medal winners. Moreover, as you experienced this book, you quickly realized that it is terribly boring. Next, you realized that it has no possible classroom application. Finally, you realized that most of the information about pigeons is weirdly inaccurate. Yet, you read the thing anyway. I'm not sure that this is anything to be proud of- you have read a book with no expectation of enjoying or benefiting from it. Isn't that the opposite of what reading is supposed to be?

In fairness, I should mention that the last third of this book is better than the first two thirds. I especially liked the mating chapter, in which Mukerji uses the phrase "go all the way" hilariously. The WWI sections were interesting, if only to see how wildly unrealistic they could be. (A nictating membrane as defense against mustard gas?)

If, like me, you are persisting in your Newbery quest, then I wish you well. I hope you have only good books ahead of you. My next Newbery read is about roller skating in the 1890s. It looks pretty lame, but it can't be as painful as this book was.

Jen says

A couple of the other Newbery project members and I have -- while attempting to finish Gay-Neck -- discussed the need for a new edition with an updated title. Proposed titles include:

Iridescence-Throated: The story of the pigeon who ran away a lot

Which Colorful Bird?: A story about everything BUT the pigeon

Pigeon Rocks India!: The story of a rich boy, his famous bird, and some random hunter who keeps showing up

Of course, a new edition will never be published because this is one of the most fantastically boring books you will ever read. Really. The basic plotline goes something like this: boy gets bird, boy trains bird, boy takes bird far away to see if it will fly home, bird gets attacked by scary predator, bird is too afraid to fly, bird gets healed by a lama. Repeat many times (with slight variations) until Dhan Gopal Mukerji gets tired of writing about this bird and tells his readers to live with courage. (Hmm ... perhaps Gay-Neck's story was actually the story of man and Mukerji wanted to teach his young readers how to be free and live without fear. Perhaps. But even that can't redeem this book.)

Jeannette says

This novel, written in 1928 for children, by a man born in Calcutta, is intense, to say the least. Gay-Neck is a carrier pigeon whose "odyssey" unfolds over several years, as he learns to fly, trains for war, mates, falls into a great funk, and finally comes into The Wisdom of the Lama. Pretty deep stuff, but simply and sweetly told. The illustrations/prints are superb.

Margaret says

This has been a lovely book to read. I think the story has held up well and is still relevant today, 77 years after it was written. I loved the wonderful black and white illustrations which look like they might have originally been from wood block carvings.

I also especially liked it when Gay-Neck himself talked in the story, I wasn't expecting it and I thought several things he said were interesting and fun, for example:

Speaking of geese, he said, "Compared with them, we pigeons seem paragons of cleverness."

Speaking of swifts, he said, "Our women enjoy equal rights with men, but the female swift has always the larger part of the work to do."

And I found it interesting that, "Peacocks and tigers admire one another."

My favorite quote is from the "words of wisdom" at the end of the book -
"Whatever we think and feel will colour what we say or do."

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

This is a book I've had sitting on my shelf for years and just never got around to reading. But I recently read two very interesting articles about the author, Dhan Gopal Mukerji, which spurred me to action. I pulled the book off the shelf and finally read it. And while it is usually considered a WWI story, it is really much, much more than that.

Born into a Brahmin family, Mukerji had raised pigeons growing up in Calcutta, India in the early years of the 20th century just like so many boys his age and caste did at that time. Calling upon his own experience with his flock of 40 birds and the experiences of others, Mukerji writes about this special pigeon's life story. Almost from the moment it was born, it's young owner knows this is a special pigeon, beautiful and smart. The young master decides to name him Gay-Neck or Chitra-griva, Hindu meaning "painting in gay colours."

At first, it is up to Gay-Neck's parents to teach him to fly, and to defend himself against hawks and eagles, a pigeon's natural enemies, but soon his master takes over with the help of Ghond, a family friend and hunter who is familiar with India's forests, mountains, and wild life. Together, they take Gay-Neck on trips further

and further from home in Calcutta, releasing him to see if he will return to Calcutta. Gay-Neck's training is successful, but not without mishaps, including having to retrain him after he becomes frightened to fly again because of a hawk attack.

When WWI begins, Ghond and Gay-Neck are sent to the front as part of the Indian Army. Gay-Neck performs masterfully as a carrier pigeon saving lives during the war, but ultimately both Ghond and Gay-Neck are invalidated out and sent home. Ghond suffering with physical wounds and both suffering from PTSD. Both must be healed now.

I found *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* to be a very interesting book for a number of reasons. First, there is the story of just how a homing/carrier pigeon is trained, something I've wondered about whenever I've read a book about their use in war. Mukerji goes into quite a bit of detail about this, carefully describing how to begin training them and why a trainer might have to tie a pigeons's wings to prevent it from flying, as well as the retraining process after the pigeon has been attacked or become frightened as Gay-Neck did on the battlefield.

Gay-Neck is also a window into the life of an Indian boy from a high caste. Gay-Neck's young master (like Mukerji himself), has the leisure time and money to spend on raising his flock of pigeon's, living in a two story private home with a flat roof for the pigeon coops. There is no mention of the British until the war, even though India was still a colony of the British Empire, nor any mention of the poorer people in Calcutta.

But it is Mukerji's descriptions of natural and religious life that really makes this novel. Whether they are in the jungle, dealing with a tiger, an angry elephant, a killer water buffalo, or resting and meditating at a lamasery with the lamas, or describing the majesty of the Himalayas, the writing is always beautiful and the language simply poetic. even when Mukerji is graphically describing the action on front lines. At times, during the war, Mukerji writes from Gay-Neck's point of view since his master was only a teenager and couldn't accompany his bird to the front. Thus, the reader is able to read what Gay-Neck sees and experiences, from a wild dog at the front, to machine eagles spitting fire in the sky.

And, the dramatic black and white graphic illustrations by Russian-born artist Boris Artzybasheff are the perfect compliment to this book.

While I enjoyed finally reading *Gay-Neck*, what I am not sure about is whether this is a book that would appeal to today's young reader. Plus, sensitive readers should be aware that there are some graphic descriptions throughout this book.

Gay-Neck won the Newbery in 1928 and I believe, the author is the only Indian author to have won that award to day. You might want to read these recent articles about Dhan Gopal Mukerji. You can find them [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)

This book is recommended for readers age 10+
This book was purchased for my personal library.

Linda Lipko says

While this 1927 Newbery Medal winner is not one of my favorites, it is worth the time spent reading the poetic, beautiful allegorical, lyrical language of the author.

The setting is 1914 with war looming ever present. It is the story of a carrier pigeon named Gay Neck and his owner, a young 14 year old Indian boy.

As Gay Neck's owner trains him to be a carrier pigeon, they travel many miles throughout Indian jungle wherein both lives are in danger. Weaving between the voice of the owner and then the pigeon, the reader soars with the vivid images of war waged both man against man and beast against beast.

Judy says

The city of Calcutta, which boasts of a million people, must have at least two million pigeons.

I love that opening line. It paints a vivid picture that truly opens the story.

This Newbery winner is unlike any I've read. And in a good way. It's best to start reading this without any preconceptions, especially don't think of it as a story for children. The first third of the book is a nature tale set in the Himalayas. Not only is this about a pigeon, as narrated by the 15-year-old pigeon keeper, it also gives insight into other birds -- hawks, an eagle family, Himalayan pheasants (which are truly gorgeous birds -- I looked them up on the internet), and swifts. I'm thinking that much of this story is non-fiction.

Then the point of view switches to that of the bird. The reader is told that, *It is not hard for us to understand him if we use the grammar of fancy and the dictionary of imagination.* Mukerji narrates the story as it would seem to the pigeon, but there aren't any talking animals (much to my relief).

His pigeon was so intelligent and well-trained that it was drafted into service during WWI. (I didn't even realize that soldiers from India fought in France.) The last fourth of the book is filled with battlefield descriptions based on the carrier pigeon's descriptions. Mukerji clearly appreciates and believes in the abilities of his birds. After returning from war, the bird and his keeper returned to the wild for healing. (I ask, how do we heal when we've destroyed the wild?)

The author's thoughts about zoos:

What a pity that most young people instead of seeing one animal in nature--which is worth a hundred in any Zoo--must derive their knowledge of God's creatures from their appearance in prisons. ... How do we manage to think that we know all about an animal by gazing at him penned in a cage?

It would be interesting to read comments from young readers. This is so different from today's teen fiction that I think few kids would actually finish the book.

Goodreads provides this info about the author:

"Dhan Gopal Mukerji was born in a small village in India in 1890, he was passionate about bringing understanding of the Indian people and culture to American readers through his own unique brand of expressive and poetic language. In 1936, the driven yet unhappy DGM took his own life, in New York City. He was forty-six years of age."

How tragic. Mukerji was undoubtedly a sensitive and caring person. The war years and the change in lifestyles driven by technology had to have been hard on him. I wonder why he moved to New York City.

So how do I rate such a book? That is hard. Because it is so unusual, and because it made me think, I have given it 4-stars. If I were to use my usual criteria, it would merit 3-stars.

