



# Call Me Alastair

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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Cory Leonardo reveals in her Acknowledgements that 'This book was a winding eight-year, soul-searching journey. A crazy dream?; and, yes, at times it reads like that. There's a meandering, even whimsical plot; sometimes conversations and incidents move things on, sometimes they don't. If you settle on an African grey parrot called Alastair as your principal narrator, then who knows what sort of plot you'll end up with? Especially if, from the moment his egg cracks, the bird has the ability to think and speak fluently as he tells his own story (and we're not talking 'parrotting' here).

In addition to using a young parrot as her mouthpiece, Leonardo imposes further constraints upon herself in this debut novel. We're almost half-way through the book before the scene shifts from the back room of Pete's Pet (and Parrot!) Shack. That's not a setting likely to generate too much dynamic action, and it doesn't. Instead, there's a great deal of dialogue in a consistently comic American idiom, since Pete's store is indeed somewhere in the United States. The conversations mostly involve Alastair, his much-loved sister Aggie and a guinea-pig called Porky. Occasionally Pete and his young part-time helper Fritz chip in, along with a rabbit named Babs, some puppies and a background chorus of gerbils and infant rabbits. At this stage, the goldfish say nothing.

Things open out considerably when, to his delight, Fritz gets together enough dollars to buy Aggie and take her home. Soon after, Alastair is bought by Mrs Albertina Plopky, an elderly but sparky widow, still given to writing loving letters to her late husband, Everett (her correspondence provides another lively narrative voice). We also get to read what Fritz calls his Medical Logbook, since he's going to be a doctor one day, and keeps a record of his own health along with insights into the conditions of people he meets.

Alastair's a cross sort of critter, irritably plucking out his own feathers to the point where he resembles a naked turkey. His consuming psychological drive is to care for his sister. Time and again, he devises daring but hopelessly unworkable escapes, so that he and Aggie could fly off to Key West, Florida, where they will take up residence in a palm tree. Flaws in his escape strategies include being unable to fly and having no clue where Florida is. However, one of Alastair's undoubted skills is the composition of pastiches. He once shredded, chewed and inwardly digested an old water-damaged Norton Anthology, thus absorbing work ranging from Lewis Carroll to Herman Melville by way of Wallace Stevens.

The three narrators are all engaging, all unwittingly amusing. All miss loved ones, and now they need to break free from

their literal and metaphorical cages, to see clearly what they already have and to stop wishing for what they haven't. Of course, we know that in the end, those needs will be happily met.

The publishers suggest 8+ as a reading age, which may seem ambitious. Perhaps able younger children will race through the 350 pages to see how things turn out for such quirky characters. Older readers might relish the curious byways such a cast inevitably drifts into. There's an amusing passage, for example, when Alastair has composed a clever pastiche called 'Jabberplopky'. The poet is astonished when a hitherto silent goldfish named Humpty Dumpty suddenly offers (in 'a curious British accent at that') an eloquent explication of several portmanteau words in the text, despite the sneers of Alastair's implacable enemy, a foul-tempered cat named Tiger.

Readers who take this rambling trip as it comes, enjoying the views and in no hurry to get to the destination, will find an original, entertaining, sometimes uneven read. Leonardo's next novel could well be worth looking out for; with luck, it won't be eight years in the making.

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