

# **Catherine, Called Birdy Study Guide**

**Catherine, Called Birdy by Karen Cushman**

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# Plot Summary

Catherine, Called Birdy is the story of Catherine, the daughter of a moderately well-off baron in the years 1290 and 1291, when Catherine is thirteen and fourteen years old. The book takes the form of a journal Catherine is keeping to please her brother Edward, who is a monk and thus knowledgeable about the importance of reading and writing.

The story begins in September of 1290, when Catherine describes her world: her father's manor, her father and mother themselves (her father is bawdy, loud and disagreeable, her mother kind and sweet), and the different people she comes in contact with on a daily basis. One of the largest subplots of the book occurs when her favorite Uncle George comes home from the Crusades and falls in love with Catherine's friend Lady Aelis. However, because George does not have a high position in society, they cannot marry, and both end up marrying others (George, a crazy older woman named Ethelfritha, Aelis first to a seven-year-old duke and later to Catherine's brother Robert).

Catherine, Called Birdy discusses everything from the mundane events of her life (killing fleas, spinning and embroidery) to festivals and holidays (such as Easter or May Day, many of which are celebrated by the entire village) to her travels in England, which are limited (she goes, for example, to Lincoln with her father, or to spend a few days at Lady Aelis' manor).

The biggest thing to happen to Catherine throughout this year is her betrothal. Her father has decided that it is time for her to get married, and presents her with a string of suitors, each one more horrible than the next. No matter who comes to court her, Catherine finds something wrong with each man: one is too pompous, another too bawdy, and so forth. However, though she manages to scare many of them away, or to come up with ingenious plots to make her father scare them away, her father eventually betroths her to the worst of them all - Shaggy Beard, a middle-aged man who has been married before and who is absolutely disgusting.

Catherine spends the year fighting the marriage. She refuses to marry him, though she realizes that her father may be able to physically force her to; she comes up with many different plots to escape, and alternate versions of her life where she will run away and be a monk, or escape overseas and go on the Crusades.

As the day approaches for her official betrothal, she runs away to her Uncle George and Aunt Ethelfritha's home, thinking that she and her aunt can come up with some plan. Once there, though, she realizes that her aunt is completely crazy and that she herself will be the same no matter who she marries; thus, she allows her uncle to take her home. When she arrives home, though, she is confronted with the happy news that Shaggy Beard has died in a tavern brawl and she is now engaged to his son, Stephen, who is clean and young and educated. This match pleases her greatly, and she starts to dream about being married to him, counting down the days to when she can see him.



# September and October

## September and October Summary

Catherine, Called Birdy opens in September of 1290. Catherine begins with some everyday details about her life: she talks about the fleas she has to pick out of her bedding and off of her body, about how she hates spinning and her father, and how she secretly wishes she were a villager and not the daughter of a country knight. She reveals that she is writing this journal because her brother, Edward, is a monk and taught her to write. She introduces the reader to Morwenna, her nurse, to her friend Perkin, the goat boy, and to her other brothers, Robert and Thomas, who are off on the Crusades. Although her father is a knight, the family is not wealthy, and Catherine's father keeps trying to marry her off to different men; this begins right away with a wool merchant Catherine labels "Master Lack-Wit", who she describes as ugly, middle-aged, and with a plugged nose. She makes herself extremely unattractive and scares him off at dinner. At the end of the month, she is excited because her Uncle George, who has been out on the Crusades for the past twenty years, is coming home soon. She speaks briefly of the birds in her room (the reason she has her nickname) and describes how it is quarter rent day and the villagers have to pay rent to her father, sometimes with vegetables or other food if they can't pay with money.

In October, Catherine begins to write more and more in her journal. She describes all of the remedies she helps her mother concoct for various household ailments, and talks about a group of Jews who pass through her village on their way out of England. She spies on them and listens to their stories, expecting them to have horns and tails but finding them to be a lot like Christians, telling stories from the Old Testament and about where they came from. Intrigued, Catherine puts on boy's clothes and tries to travel with them; she talks to an old Jewish lady, who tells her that she needs to be herself.

After the Jews have left, Catherine is once again tied up in her day-to-day life. On St. Faith's day, she is supposed to put her mother's wedding ring under her pillow and dream of her husband, but instead dreams of the miller's farting apprentice; angry, she throws the ring in with the pigs and then has to spend a day searching for it. Catherine then describes the villagers building a cottage for Ralph Littlemouse. She goes to help them and starts a mud fight when a beautiful but pompous man arrives on horseback, asking for her father's house, saying (without recognizing her) that he is going to propose to the Lady Catherine. Catherine says that the Lady Catherine is stupid and hunchbacked and thus scares off the terrible suitor, who never shows up for dinner.

Later, after her mother has a miscarriage (her fifth), she and Catherine travel to the abbey where Edward lives to visit. There, the monks present them with a book of Saint's Days, and Catherine falls in love with their lifestyle, as they spend a lot of their time making books and working on inks and vellum. She decides to run away to the abbey, but Edward tells her that she couldn't convince the blindest monk that she was a boy.



Catherine considers a nunnery, but decides that would mean even more embroidery. She takes the book of Saint's Days and starts labeling each day in her journal.

On the way back home, Catherine and her mother stop at a neighboring manor, where Lady Aelis, a friend of Catherine's, lives. The two girls decide to meet in a nearby field halfway between their houses in one week. Returning home, Catherine writes about her love of birds (especially geese; she does not care for swans) and the colors she saw at the abbey.

Still in October, her Uncle George comes home from the Crusades. She describes to him what she imagines them to be like, but he contradicts her. Still, she dreams of riding into battle like Queen Eleanor. His baggage comes several days after him, and he has brought her an old orange (an exotic fruit, for her) and a popinjay. He tells her that the Crusades were greedy and cruel and he cannot imagine that God is pleased by so much blood. Later, George meets Aelis, who comes to visit Catherine, and Aelis finds him extremely handsome, later bringing puppies for the manor as an excuse to visit. George and Aelis go walking together as George talks about his travels, and Catherine is extremely jealous.

## September and October Analysis

Catherine's journal entries from September and October immediately provide the reader with a lot of important information. In the first place, these entries establish her character. Rather than the meek, mild-mannered young girl that one might expect to read about in a book set in the thirteenth century, Catherine is wild and rambunctious. She has opinions on everything and an overactive imagination (exemplified by her imaginings about the Crusades as well as her desire to become a monk). Furthermore, she is much more educated than most girls of her period and class - she knows how to read and write thanks to her brother Edward, and she loves to draw and enjoys the many colors of ink that the monks use, coming up with ideas for new colors on her own.

These entries also give a wider view of the kind of world that Catherine lives in. Although she is only fourteen, her father already wants to marry her off, which is not uncommon for a girl of her age at this time. The entries show how the family is structured (two brothers are knights, one brother a monk), what is expected of women (her mother, only in her early thirties, already has four living children and has had five miscarriages), and how the manor is run (Perkin, the pig-boy, is one of Catherine's closest friends). In addition, the importance of religion in the yearly activities is obvious, as the villagers and Catherine celebrate St. Faith's day; this becomes even more important later on in the story.

As far as the narrative is concerned, the most important element of foreshadowing in September and October is the presence of possible suitors for Catherine. Her diary of this year is extremely preoccupied with who she will marry.



# November through February

## November through February Summary

In November, Catherine writes that her hated brother Robert is coming home for Christmas. She tries to imagine her "real" father, thinking that her lout of a father couldn't possibly be related to her, and imagines him as a king or a woodsmith. Later, Aelis misses an appointment in the meadow, as she is with George. Catherine, upset about the budding romance, is upset and cries a lot. She considers casting a spell on them to make them fall out of love, prays that they will; George has been very withdrawn lately. Meanwhile, Catherine's mother tells the story of how she met Catherine's father: she was the ward of a baron, and one day a young knight came and said that the baron had cheated his father out of some woods. He was so persistent that the baron was impressed, as was Catherine's mother. Later, the household is having a feast for a saint's day and Catherine tries a spell on George and Aelis, throwing dirt at them and trying to turn their love to hate.

In December, Catherine goes to see her first hanging and is horrified at how young the criminal is. On her way home, she sees an immense funeral procession and worries that the king died but finds out it was instead the queen. Her brother Thomas comes home to visit, and brings news: there are no Jews left in England. Also, he tells of the way the members of the King's court swear - the King, apparently, says "God's Breath!" Catherine decides to come up with her own swear in this vein. Another potential suitor comes for her, but she brags so much about her father's riches that he asks for an enormous dowry, which her father refuses to give. George is leaving soon, and there is a celebration for her brother Thomas's Saint's day; with these celebrations and Christmas coming, Catherine must share her bedroom with many visiting girls. Robert arrives in time for Christmas, which is a drawn-out affair with a feast in the hall and a nativity play; Perkin, the pig-boy (and Catherine's friend) is named Master of the Christmas Revels.

In January, Catherine begins to teach Perkin how to read. She complains that she must treat and cure everyone's sicknesses and hangovers. Meanwhile, as the manor is being cleaned up after the revels, she dreams that George has died. Robert leaves, taking Catherine's favorite puppy with him, but the puppy pees on him and he gives it back. Catherine makes a list of things women can't do, which she'd like to do; meanwhile, Aelis gets married (against her will, apparently) to a seven-year-old duke, and George is desolate. Another suitor comes for Catherine but is put off by her father. Catherine is excited because Aelis is coming to visit soon. Two monks visit on their way to Rome, staying with the family for several days.

In February, yet another man comes to seek Catherine's hand, but she is rude and sulks and eventually sets fire to the privy - with him in it - by accident. Catherine's mother is pregnant again, and Catherine is afraid for her life. A brawl occurs in the hall and Catherine doctors the men, but one dies later of a serious head wound. After Valentine's



day, Catherine is going to visit Aelis and describes the great hall and castle where she lives. Aelis still loves George and is heartbroken; she hasn't yet met her husband. The girls find out that the King's cousin is coming to visit, and Catherine imagines making friend with the woman. However, when she arrives, Catherine is disappointed to find out that she is old and ugly and looks like a mouse. Still, she calls Catherine "Little Bird" and tells her many stories. Catherine confides the dreams and imagined adventures she thought the two of them would have, but the woman says that she could never do that, as she is the King's cousin, and that Catherine must learn "about wings".

Later in the month, Robert is getting married to a woman who he has possibly already made pregnant. They have a huge feast. A disgusting man she calls "Shaggy Beard" is her partner at the feast and tries to kill one of her dogs, but Robert stops him. Catherine worries that she will be matched with Shaggy Beard's son and is very rude to him, even addressing him as she would a pig ("hoy!").

## November through February Analysis

In her entries from November through February, Catherine shows both her tough side and her developing sensitivity. She is still as wild as ever, imagining running away with the King's cousin and trying to cast spells on George and Aelis. However, her tenderness for George makes her feel extremely guilty. The reader can see her growing sensitivity as well when she goes to her first hanging; she is horrified at how young the criminal is and extremely upset by the proceedings. Similarly, she is very upset when she finds out that the queen has died. These reactions contrast her toughness in other aspects of her life - arguing with her father, or her dreams of escape.

Her account of these months also show a growing realization of the importance of her place in society. Though she has not accepted it, this place in the social hierarchy will become more and more important as the book goes on. The most important occurrence of this is, of course, her encounter with the King's cousin. After all of her dreams of running away and having wild adventures with this woman, Catherine finds out that the King's cousin is in fact just as bound as she is to convention - if not more so.

Finally, the appearance of Shaggy Beard introduces a character who will play a pivotal role in the narrative in the upcoming months. This man is one of the most disgusting and terrible that she has yet come across, and Catherine dreads having to marry his son. The fact that she eventually will marry his son - and see it as a triumph - is one of the book's great ironies.



# March through June

## March through June Summary

In March, Robert leaves with his wife, and Catherine imagines her own fancy wedding. The weather is getting warmer, and Edward sends books for lent. The estate has visitors again, including a boring girl named Agnes, who Catherine shoves into an eel pie. During Lent, Catherine questions some of her religious teachings, including the story of Lazarus, among others. Later, she gets locked into her room for having a spitting contest. She is excited when a beautiful foster boy, Geoffrey, comes to stay. The manor receives a message from Shaggy Beard, who wants to marry Catherine himself. Her mother talks to her about her duty, but Catherine still considers running away, though she talks to Perkin about it and they realize that her options are limited. Later in the month is the celebration of the New Year. The engagement between Meg and the son of the baker, two townspeople, is also announced.

April begins with Fool's day, though Catherine is not successful at fooling anybody. She follows Geoffrey around and finds that he's not what she had pictured; she sees him in front of a large group of boys making fun of Perkin, who has a limp. In revenge, she shoves him into the pond. Holy Week is coming soon, with many religious services and so on; she sees Wat, the servant, working through the night. George announces that he will be coming to visit after Easter. Meanwhile, Catherine's pregnant mother is not feeling well. During Easter, when the house is full of guests, negotiations with Shaggy Beard carry on for Catherine's dowry, and George later comes to visit, bringing his new wife, Catherine's Aunt Ethelfritha, who Catherine finds old but fun. However, George has changed and is much more withdrawn. Ethelfritha is crazy, talking about seeing her dead husband; apparently, she was struck by lightning. When Aelis comes to visit, George refuses to see her. Geoffrey leaves. Later, there is more trouble with Shaggy Beard and the negotiations. The month ends with Catherine finding a peddler on the road and buying cages for her birds shaped like castles.

May starts off with May Day, in which the villagers gather branches and a tree to make a maypole and dance. Shaggy Beard's agents, to Catherine's dismay, visit again. Catherine is curious about kissing and wants to practice on Perkin, who refuses. Later, she finds that negotiations have finished and she is to marry Shaggy Beard; however, her mother has begged them to wait until her baby is born in the fall. Her mother falls very ill and Catherine tends to her before they call in a Spanish physician. After reading her book of Saints, Catherine decides that she would like to be called Aelgifu, but no one will call her this. She spends time hemming sheets for her marriage and talking with "Odd William," a self-styled scholar, who tells her stories from fables and history. He is particularly interested in the "Crossbridge miracle", in which a man woke up from a disease suddenly able to speak fluent Hebrew.

At the beginning of June, the fluent Hebrew is discovered to be gibberish. Catherine learns that Robert's wife died in childbirth. Her father has a toothache, and they call in





the Spanish physician, who says it is a problem of excess blood and cuts a vein in her father's tongue. Later, he says that they need to smoke the problem out but accidentally sets his beard on fire. Her father decides to go see a tooth puller in Lincoln, and Catherine goes with him. She visits merchants and sees a play of Corpus Christi, the story of the Last Judgment, in addition to helping her father get his tooth pulled. Back at home, her mother is well, and Catherine imagines Shaggy Beard dying as she kills fleas on her bed. Midsummer Eve and Day bring bonfires, but Perkin's granny dies; the villagers think that she was "elf-shot". They sit up with her all night and then have a mass. Catherine comes up with the idea of giving his Granny's cottage to Meg and Alf, the newlyweds from the village.

## March through June Analysis

Catherine's entries from March through June are concerned with love and marriage. The fact that Shaggy Beard himself wants to marry her comes as a horrible shock: he is one of the most disgusting characters that her father has brought into her life so far. Meanwhile, Catherine is presented with numerous other versions of wedded life in her time. She sees Meg and Alf, who are poor but happy; Robert and his wife, who were brought together by lust and who end tragically, with his wife's death; and George and Ethelfritha, who are married because of convenience and, while not blissfully happy, a supposed "good match" for the time. These couples are contrasted by Catherine's first real crush (after her crush on George, who is of course off-limits as her uncle) on Geoffrey. Her growing romantic feelings are crushed as she witnesses him acting cruelly about one of her closest friends.

These months also provide an excellent picture of life in England at this time. Catherine draws vivid pictures of what cities were like at this time, as she visits the merchants and sees the Corpus Christi play in Lincoln. She describes the proceedings after Perkin's granny's death, showing what death and funerals were like for normal people (rather than queens) in this period. At the same time, she tells of normal festivities - like Easter, and May Day - and the kind of activities normal people and minor nobility would have undertaken.



# July through September

## July through September Summary

In July, Shaggy Beard sends presents to Catherine. She realizes that he will need her consent for a real wedding. Catherine's father goes to London; Aelis's young husband dies. Catherine visits Meg in the cottage and is jealous of the love she feels there. She talks to her mother, who is suffering, about the nature of marriage. George and Ethelfritha come to visit and George is obviously in emotional pain. Catherine starts a book of remedies; the monks return, and talk about how they found relics in Rome on a soldier's property. The church holds a procession for everyone to see and kiss the relics.

August is the month of the harvest. Catherine's father returns. Her mother has a fever and her father is very upset but gentle with her mother. Catherine goes to a fair, buying presents, but sees a dancing bear, who is severely mistreated. She is so upset by this that she offers to buy the bear with the wedding presents Shaggy Beard sent her, effectively binding her to him and showing that she accepts his offer. Later, she does not know what to do with the bear, but her brother Robert takes the bear to an abbess and bribes her to keep the bear.

In September, Catherine is going to be formally betrothed to Shaggy Beard. Her mother goes into labor for two days, with a midwife nearby. She gives birth to a baby girl, but is feverish and ill after. The priest comes to say the last rites, but Catherine's father throws him downstairs. The baby is named Eleanor. Aelis, later, is to wed Robert; Catherine is horrified, but Aelis says it was her idea. Catherine begins the countdown to Shaggy Beard; she says her goodbyes and frees her birds, packing. However, the riders come to take her and she sprints to Perkin's, then to visit her Aunt Ethelfritha. They talk about running away together to Ireland or London, but her aunt is obviously insane and Catherine thinks about the Jewish woman she met on the road, and realizes that she carries her family with her and no matter where she goes, she is still herself. George takes her home and she finds out the Shaggy Beard is dead, killed in a brawl, and that she will marry his son Stephen, who is young and clean and loves learning. She is delighted by this match and can't wait to go to him.

## July through September Analysis

July through September give a happy ending to the story, both for Catherine and for modern readers, who would understandably balk at Catherine's marriage to a middle-aged drunken bore. By ending up engaged to Stephen, Catherine maintains the social order by marrying somebody in the same position as her father, while at the same time being able to spend her life with somebody more educated and similar to her - or at least, the same age!



This section, more than any other, shows the importance of the social hierarchy and order in Catherine's society. Catherine herself has to realize this when she runs away to her Aunt Ethelritha. While her aunt is encouraging and comes up with numerous plans for their adventures, she is insane and Catherine finally sees this, realizing that she has to go home to accept her fate. Catherine's match to Stephen is mirrored by Aelis's match with Robert and the birth of her sister Eleanor. All three events are the best possible outcomes for what was generally a very structured and sometimes uncomfortable lifestyle.



# Characters

## Catherine

The title character of the book, Catherine is a fourteen-year-old girl living in England in 1290 and 1291. She begins her journal - the book we are reading - because her brother, Edward, encourages it. Unlike most girls of her time, Catherine is extremely strong-willed and hates girlish things and especially the tasks that normally fall to women. For example, she detests spinning and weaving (and is, in fact, allowed not to do these things as long as she keeps writing in her book). She is short-tempered and often argues with her father, doing things like pushing girls she doesn't like into eel pies, or pushing her father's foster child into the river. She is extremely principled, however, and loyal: she reacts so strongly to Geoffrey because he is making fun of her friend, and she accepts a terrible future just to save the life of a bear. She loves to read and write and draw, and would love the life of a monk, creating books. Catherine is much more strong-willed than most girls of her time: she stands in stark contrast to her calm mother, or to her friend Aelis, who is always in and out of love.

## George

George, Catherine's uncle, is a knight returning from the Crusades. Catherine is completely thrilled by the stories he tells of being abroad and of his adventures there, even though he tells her that the bloodshed is nothing to be proud of. George is brave and good-looking, and Catherine dreams of him slaying dragons and doing other heroic things. He falls in love with the Lady Aelis, Catherine's closest friend. However, he is the younger son and has little wealth of his own and so they are not permitted to marry. Catherine believes that the curse she put on both of them caused them to split apart. When Aelis marries a young boy, he is desolate and even after his own marriage to the crazy Aunt Ethelfritha, he is still quite upset. His life is one of duty. Although Catherine often complains about how restricted life is for girls, the character of George shows the reader that even men's options were limited and had a lot to do with duty, rather than pleasure. After marrying Ethelfritha, he is withdrawn and less excitable and dashing than he was before, and refuses to see Aelis in many situations. However, he is still helpful to Catherine and still does his duty to his family admirably.

## Father

Catherine's father, a landed Baron, is a complex character. He is depicted at first as a complete and utter lout. He argues with Catherine constantly, sometimes smacking her or hitting her and often punishing her by making her stay in her room. Catherine sees him as extremely greedy; hence his desire to marry her off to the highest bidder and his complete lack of interest in who she would like to marry. He is more concerned about what he can get from her marriage and is horrified when the suitors ask for dowries of



any kind. He also loves to drink and party and is often hungover, which Catherine, along with her mother, must cure. However, as the book goes on, Catherine (and the reader) begins to see his softer side, mostly through his relations with her mother. Catherine's mother tells the story of how she first fell in love with him, how charming and persistent he was. Furthermore, when Catherine's mother falls sick after giving birth to Eleanor, her father stays near her and is very tender and sweet. In ways, this relationship is mirrored by the later relationship between Robert, who Catherine also depicts as somewhat of a lout, and Aelis, who is clever and sweet as well.

## **Shaggy Beard**

Unlike Catherine's father, Shaggy Beard has few redeeming qualities. He is the man Catherine is supposed to marry; he is lewd, vulgar, and much older than Catherine. He sends many presents to her when they become informally engaged. He is apparently quite cruel to his son Stephen, who is about Catherine's age and who is much cleaner and more learned than his father.

## **Perkin**

The pig-boy and one of Catherine's closest friends.

## **Perkin's Granny**

A villager; Perkin's grandmother.

## **Catherine's Mother**

The sweet-tempered wife of Catherine's father, the Baron.

## **Edward**

Catherine's brother, a monk.

## **Robert**

Catherine's brother, a knight.

## **Thomas**

Catherine's brother, a knight,



## **Ethelfritha**

George's wife and Catherine's eventual aunt.

## **The King's Cousin**

An elderly lady Catherine makes friends with.

## **Aelis**

A lady and one of Catherine's closest friends.

## **Traveling Jews**

A group of wanderers who Catherine comes across; she likes to listen to their stories.

## **Meg and Alf**

Villagers who marry for love.

## **Stephen**

Shaggy Beard's son and Catherine's eventual husband.



# Objects/Places

## Birds

Catherine keeps birds in her room; hence, her nickname "Birdy".

## Lincoln

The largest nearby city, where the family travels for her father to see the tooth-puller.

## Judaism

All Jewish people were banished from England because of their religion during this time.

## Saints

Catherine is obsessed with her Saint's book and the stories of how they became holy figures.

## Embroidery

Young girls at this time had to embroider a lot; it is one of Catherine's least favorite tasks.

## Monastery

Catherine's brother Edward is a monk and she envies his life, creating books all day.

## Saint's Day

The feast of the saint for whom a character was named - for example, Saint Catherine, or Saint Thomas.

## Dowry

Money or property offered on behalf of a woman to make her more marriageable.



## **Granny's Cottage**

The home of Perkin's granny, and later Meg and Alf.

## **Education**

Catherine longs for an education and does her best to write and teach herself things.

## **Profanity**

Swear words - Catherine experiments with many different curses, including "God's thumbs!"





# Themes

## Independence

Catherine's independence or freedom is one of the most important themes of the book. Catherine often comes up with many plans to be free and do exactly what she likes - travel overseas, spend her time reading and creating books in a monastery - however, at the end of the day, she is trapped and must submit to her father and society's wills. This is strongly symbolized by the birds she keeps in cages in her room. Even though they are in beautiful cages (shaped as castles), they - like she - are trapped, only to be set free at the end of the book, before her wedding to Shaggy Beard. Catherine's encounters with numerous characters also underscore this desire for independence from social hierarchies and rules. For example, when Catherine talks to the elderly Jewess, the woman tells her that God will ask, "why were you not Catherine?" - that is, to accept who she is and to make the best of it. Similarly, Catherine has many plans for meeting the King's cousin, thinking that they will run away and have adventures together. However, she learns that the cousin is even more trapped than she is, but has made the best of her limited freedoms. Catherine's mother also stresses the need to carve out one's own place within the options available - it is perhaps thanks to her influence that Catherine eventually realizes that her independence and her freedom are things that she carries inside her and are not determined by her actual societal position as much as she initially thought.

## Religion

Religion plays an extremely important role in Catherine, Called Birdy, as it did in English society at this time. This is most immediately apparent in the book of Saints that Catherine has - each day belongs to a Saint, and she delights in telling their stories. At this time, people who could read and write mostly did so about religious stories. The importance of Saint's days is also underscored by the manor's celebration of them - they appear to hold as much significance, if not more, than the character's actual birthdays. Catherine's visit to the monastery underscores the importance of religion at this time, describing the peaceful day-to-day activities of the monks and how Catherine longs to be one of them; the visiting monks who bring back the dubious relics from Rome also show how important these institutions were. Indeed, religion acts as the organizing force for the year. Again, this is indicated not only by Catherine's notation of the Saint's days in her diary, but also by the festivities of the villagers and even of the manor as they celebrate certain days. While many of these - April Fool's Day, or May Day - don't have anything to do with Catholicism, many others - Christmas, Easter, regular Saint's Days - do. However, Catholicism in this time is combined with a certain amount of superstition. For example, on Saint Faith's day, Catherine is convinced that if she sleeps with her mother's ring under her pillow, she will dream of her future husband; this kind of story most likely arose from local lore and has little to nothing to do with



actual Catholic doctrine. However, examples such as these illustrate the importance of religion for Catherine's society.

## Social Hierarchy

The importance of maintaining the social hierarchy is evident in almost every aspect of Catherine, Called Birdy. The most important example of this is Catherine's pending marriage. In the first place, she has to marry somebody of her station in life or higher in order to please her father and maintain her position in society. Thus, the men (old and young) who come into her life as potential suitors all represent ways of keeping this position, which she does not care about. However, as the book goes on, she eventually bends her will to this idea and finally does agree to marry Shaggy Beard (though she does not, thankfully, have to do so). The importance of the social hierarchy is also illustrated poignantly through Aelis and George's short romance. Though the two are obviously in love with each other, George's position is not high enough to allow him to marry somebody in Aelis's position, and the two have to go their separate ways. Eventually, Aelis is permitted to marry Robert, who as an elder brother has a higher position than George, a younger brother; however, even then, Aelis only has any say in the match because she was initially married to a boy of her father's choosing, who happened to be seven years old. Certain characters - for example, Catherine's parents - are shown to have married for love. However, this is only permitted if they do not upset the social order. In this case, Catherine's mother as the ward of a baron and Catherine's father as a landed young knight were well-matched and thus permitted to marry.



# Style

## Point of View

Catherine, Called Birdy is told from the point of view of Catherine, in the first person (as it is a journal). She is very blunt and straightforward, though becomes more and more sensitive as the year goes on. In general, she gives what appears to be a fairly accurate view of events, as she tells stories even when she does not play the heroic role and even stories which do not show her in a flattering light. She is young, about fourteen, but in ways is much wiser than her years and was perhaps born before her time. She yearns to travel and to read and write like her relatives and stories she's heard.

Catherine is prone to snap judgments about people she meets, including all of her suitors. This is also evident in her imaginings of other people before she meets them - the King's cousin, for instance, who she is sure she will like, or her suitors, who she is sure she will not. Thus, while her point of view is reliable for its depiction of events, it is not always accurate for her descriptions of people. For example, her brother Robert, who she characterizes as loathsome and brutal, actually works in several instances to help Catherine with some of her kinder projects - like saving the dancing bear from starvation, or saving her puppy from being killed by Shaggy Beard.

## Setting

Catherine, Called Birdy is set in England of 1290 and 1291. In this time and place, it was extremely uncommon for women to have much independence, if any at all.

Catherine has grown up on the manor of her father, a baron of with a small amount of property; she and her family live in a village. She travels a little bit throughout the book, enlarging the setting. For example, Catherine goes to Lincoln with her father, to visit the tooth-puller, where she sees merchants and plays. She also goes to visit Lady Aelis at her estate. For the most part, however, Catherine lives in a small world consisting partially of her village but mostly of the manor itself, where she was born and raised. In fact, her upcoming marriage will send her farther away from home than she has ever been. The manor itself has numerous rooms, though not so many that visitors don't often have to sleep with Catherine, sometimes even in her bed, which she detests. There is also a great hall, where large feasts are held on holidays and Saint's days. Her parents, of course, have a chamber as well. The manor has significant grounds, and her father as baron technically owns the cottages of many villagers, who pay rent to him.

## Language and Meaning

Catherine's language is slightly more informal and modern than a girl of her time and education would have used, to make her story accessible to contemporary readers. For the most part, she uses everyday language that contemporary readers should be able to follow, as many words are the same. Certain expressions ("Corpus bones!" for



example, which Catherine often uses as a curse), while not in modern usage, are easy to guess the meaning of in context. Some of the words she uses - such as "mayhap", for instance, are equally easy to figure out, even for readers who have not seen these words before. Her syntax is more formal than is currently used. For example, Catherine rarely uses contractions (don't, can't) but always writes the word in full - does not, cannot. From time to time, Catherine also uses or quotes expressions from her time period: for example, "luck is better than early rising". It is often Morwenna, her nurse, who tells her these expressions.

## Structure

Catherine, Called Birdy is structured as a journal of a young girl. Thus, each day (or ever few days), Catherine enters in what has happened to her and the events of the past few hours or days. Some days she writes only a few words, other days she writes several pages - just as a young girl might do today in her journal. She does not write much the first month, September 1290, that she has the diary, but then writes a good deal in October and afterwards. After traveling to the monastery with her mother, she uses the book of saints they received there to label each day as belonging to the proper saint; some days, she reflects upon the lives of these saints, usually in an ironic way, wondering why women are sainted for being virgins or refusing to marry pagan kings but men are sainted for more interesting deeds, for example. Although the events of each month are quite varied and rarely follow one strict narrative, the story of Catherine getting engaged is the overarching narrative thread that pulls the book together. In the beginning, her many suitors are presented as comic characters; the fact that she ends up engaged to one of them is therefore shocking. While many events occur throughout the book, the story of who Catherine will marry and when - or how she will escape it - serves as the common denominator.



## Quotes

"The writing I learned of my brother Edward, but the words are my own."  
19th Day of September, p. 3

"The stars and my family align to make my life black and miserable."  
24th Day of September, Front Matter

"Why must the lady of the manor do all the least lovable tasks? I'd rather be the pig boy."  
1st Day of October, p. 13

"I think I love geese more than any other birds because no one else does. . . They are cunning, greedy, shortsighted, and stubborn - much like me, now that I think on it."  
15th Day of October, p. 30

"The beast my father roared especially ugly roars today. I never seem to please him, although it is true I never try."  
3rd Day of November, p. 44

"Would I choose to die rather than be forced to marry? I hope to avoid the issue, for I do not think I have it in me to be a saint."  
25th Day of November, p. 54

"Perkin wants me to teach him to read. He dreams of being a scholar but most likely will just be a goat boy who can read."  
1st Day of January, p. 78

"I am sorry that Aelis was sold at auction to the highest bidder like a horse at a horse fair, but I am gladdened to have my uncle George back."  
13th Day of January, p. 84

"Mating season has saddened even Morwenna's wits."  
15th Day of February, p. 99

"No further words from my father about Shaggy Beard, so mayhap the trouble has passed and these plans, too, come to nothing."  
3rd Day of March, p. 113

"I think if I were a king I would keep one room in my palace just for me, where I could go and be alone."  
15th Day of April, p. 136

"Perkin likens me to a pig, Morwenna to a dog. I wish I were one or the other."  
9th Day of May, p. 149



"[S]till I would rather be Meg, about to marry the choice of my heart, rather than the lady Catherine, promised to a pig. I am desolate."

21st Day of June, p. 163

"I think sometimes that people are like onions. On the outside smooth and whole and simple but inside ring upon ring, complex and deep."

12th Day of September, p. 197

"I realize that Shaggy Beard has won my body, but no matter whose wife I am, I will still be me."

21st Day of September, p. 203

"The world is full of possibilities."

23rd Day of September, p. 205



## Topics for Discussion

What different images are given of marriage in Catherine, Called Birdy?

Compare and contrast Catherine and her mother and Catherine and her father. How does Catherine embody her parents' traits, good and bad?

What is the role of Morwenna in the story? How does her role contrast to that of Perkin?

Why is Catherine angry about marrying Shaggy Beard but happy to marry Stephen? What is society's opinion of the two matches?

How does Catherine change throughout the year? Which changes is she aware of, and which does she not appear to notice?

Older women play an important role in Catherine, Called Birdy. Compare and contrast the elderly Jewess and the King's cousin and the effects they have upon Catherine.

Catherine often complains that men have more options than women. Discuss the options that were available to women and those available to men. Did men have true freedom to choose their lives?