

YALSA, JANUARY 11, 2016

Nancy Plain, *This Strange Wilderness*

It's a great pleasure to be here today with all of you and to be part of a group that includes such fine writers as Margarita, Tobin, Steve, and Tim. I'm hugely honored—bowed over, in fact--to have my book recognized by YALSA, and I want to thank everyone at YALSA for this wonderful experience. I'd also like to thank my publisher, the University of Nebraska Press, for believing in the Audubon project from the start.

John James Audubon was a fascinating topic for me personally because his story brings together three things I care about—art, tales of the early American frontier, and the lives and ways of animals. As a member of the Audubon Society, I'm pretty passionate about the protection and preservation of wildlife and wilderness, and I've always been curious about the society's namesake. How did Audubon's name become this powerful symbol of animal protection? How did he create his legacy? (Show Slide 1, portrait of Audubon, painted by his sons)

First, he was a revolutionary bird artist, perhaps the greatest who has ever lived. Totally self-taught, he conceived the idea of painting every bird species in America and devoted his life to that goal, taking decades to compile his magnificent book, *The Birds of America*, life-size images of almost 500 species. (Show Slides 2, the Great Egret, and 3, the Yellow-breasted Chat)

He was the founder of modern ornithology, too. When he was only 20, he became the first person to study bird migration by banding birds' legs. Many more discoveries followed, including the discovery of quite a few new species, and countless other facts about birds. He called birds "the objects of my greatest delight."

As I researched him and read his writings—journals, letters, and field notes—I came to think that his life was truly stranger than fiction. Born in Haiti and raised in France, he came to America when Thomas Jefferson was president. In 1808, he set up a small general store on the Kentucky frontier. But he spent more time studying birds in the woods than behind the store counter. Naturally, the store failed, Audubon went bankrupt and was thrown into jail for debt. It was only then, when his life hit rock bottom, that he decided to paint all the bird species in America and publish his work in a giant book. Friends and family thought this was a crazy, reckless dream. But nothing could deter him, and to realize this dream, he set out to explore the American wilderness. Along the way, he survived an earthquake, almost drowned in quicksand, met frontiersmen and Native Americans, outlaws and congressmen, even presidents. His travels took him to Florida and Texas before they were states and from the New Jersey shore to Indian country in the Dakotas. But when he tried to find a publisher for his work, he was shunned by the American academic establishment as a pretender, a backwoods "nobody." So he sailed to

Europe, where he finally found fame and a publisher for his great book. (Show Slide 4, the Northern Bobwhite and the Red-tailed Hawk)

The more I learned about Audubon, the more I began to think that his legacy is even more important than the spectacular achievements of his lifetime. In many ways, he was a man ahead of his time: he correctly predicted the extinction of several bird species (Show Slide 5, the Passenger Pigeon). And when he went out West in 1843 and saw buffalo bones littering the ground, he worried about what he called “the terrible destruction of life, as it were for nothing” of the buffalo. He predicted that this species, too, was in danger of extinction. (Show Slide 6, the Buffalo). So I believe that his life’s work, groundbreaking in its own right, can also be an inspiration to us today and an invitation to do our best for our country’s wildlife, to protect and preserve.

Thank you very much!