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Language in the Blood by Kent Nelson. Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1991, 260 pp., \$18.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Bill McCarron, Department of Literature and Languages, East Texas State University, Commerce

Late in Kent Nelson's bold novel, the discerning first-person narrator, Scott Talmedge, links observed nature to human passion: "I wanted to see the rail [Yellow Rail, a rare marsh bird] because birds are in me. They are in my blood, like a language. They were what I first knew how to love" (241). Scott's remarks provide the novel's title as well as a clue to the novel's basic thematic structure: what happens to birdsÑin Massachusetts, Minnesota, Arizona, Old Mexico, TexasÑmodifies what happens to the novel's main characters. For example, Scott remembers spotting an Ivory Gull off the coast of Maine; then he recalls meeting Demer, his first wife. She was and is a unique species, but she can also blend in with other people just as the Ivory Gull can with other gulls. She abandons Scott to fly to Guatemala where she rescues victimized peasants and helps them 'migrate' to the United States.

Tilghman Myre, Scott's former Harvard roommate, is the catalyst for all the other characters in the novel. Independently wealthy, he has retired in his early 30's to Tucson where he builds a large wall around his run-down adobe home in a seamy section of Tucson, west of the University of Arizona campus. However, while Tilghman walls out the city and his ex-live-in companion, Francie Slocum, he masterminds the rescue missions of the Guatemalan refugees. Thanks to his friend Ellis Carmichael's shrimp boat, the downtrodden enter Mexico through the Sea of Cortez; then they are driven by truck and Tilghman's Land Rover into Arizona. These poor immigrants are land birds, turned sea birds, turned land birds again. Demer writes from Central America about vultures "fighting over the pieces" (188) of a road-kill dog. Her description anticipates Tilghman's death where he is run over by a Park Ranger truck while helping illegal immigrants to freedom.

Francie Slocum is a bird, a dancer by profession, forced to model for a living. Her photogenic legs are thin and delicate, like those of wading birds. The Caracara is the national bird of Mexico. Nelson invests the bird with symbolic weight by having Scott see it as "more a vulture than an eagle" (204). The mythical Trogon with its "green scapulars, black head, coppery tail" and red breast (204) winters in Guatemala's jungles, but summers in the canyons of southeastern Arizona. The protagonist/narrator, Professor Scott Talmedge, is a visiting professor of ornithology at the University of Arizona. He and his department head, Harriet Keating, interest students in setting mist nets in the washes and arroyos outside Tucson. They trap vireos, gnatcatchers, even a hawk. Again, Nelson's graphic description is also highly symbolic because the characters in the novel are enmeshed variously with each other (Demer has passed from Scott to Tilghman to a younger man also doing rescue work in Guatemala; Harriet sleeps with Scott before taking up with Carmichael; Francie marries Scott in the end).

Each character must learn the language of his/her individual blood, whether it be Scott's saving a woman from a rattlesnake bite or Demer opting to take on the Washington, D.C., bureaucracy or Ellis Carmichael finally finishing his long-abandoned second novel. Shrikes impale grasshoppers on barbed-wire

Selected Letters Of John Ciardi

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