What is so compelling about falconry? Tim Gallagher mines his lifelong obsession with falcons for an answer in this engaging volume interweaving memoir, history, and travelogue. An entire subculture of the sport exists outside the mainstream of American society, consisting of obsessed individuals who still use the ancient training techniques and language of falconry. Gallagher finds that his personal story connects on many levels with that of Frederick II, the thirteenth-century Holy Roman Emperor, legendary falconer, and notorious freethinker who brought the full wrath of the medieval Church down upon his dynasty. While following in Frederick’s footsteps through southern Italy, Gallagher ponders his own history as well. What salve to his spirit did falconry provide when it ignited his passion at age twelve? Beset by a turbulent childhood dominated by a brutal and violent father, Gallagher turned to this sport for emotional release. He offers us a unique glimpse into contemporary falconry, and the result is a surprisingly frank and revealing personal story.

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My Personal Review:
This is the best book I’ve read this year, and it came as a complete surprise. I had no previous interest in falconry, but I was familiar with Tim Gallagher’s role in the rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker and had enjoyed reading his book, THE GRAIL BIRD, which details the behind-the-scenes events that led to finding that iconic species. I had also seen Gallagher speak at Cornell once, and he seemed interesting and passionate about his work. I picked up FALCON FEVER purely out of curiosity.
Im not sure exactly what my expectations were, but FALCON FEVER completely exceeded them. The book is broken into two main parts--My Back Pages and My Frederick II Year--and in some ways its like two books in one. The first half is a memoir covering his life up to age 19, and its a harrowing story, as compellingly written as Tobias Wolffs THIS BOYS LIFE, and even more grim, as Gallagher attempts to cope with a violent, unpredictable (and often drunk) father, who frequently terrorizes his family. But Gallagher finds solace in nature, escaping for hours at a time to run in the fields with his dog. He takes up falconry at the age of 12, and it becomes a grand obsession as he strives to develop an intimate relationship with the wildest, freest creatures on Earth.

At this time, Gallagher discovers Frederick II, a thirteenth-century Holy Roman Emperor and a Renaissance man 200 years before Leonardo da Vinci. He was also perhaps the greatest falconer who ever lived, and wrote a massive tome on the subject that Gallagher devoured as a preteen. But life was tough for him. He spent the last couple of years of high school working graveyard shift at factories, trying to help support his family after they fled from his father, and he often fell asleep in class.

This was in the 1960s, and like many teens in his generation, Gallagher was deeply affected by the Viet Nam war and the alternative culture that became so pervasive then. He and his friends began experimenting with drugs, and then, in his late teens, he was caught up in a drug sting and sent to jail for months. This was the most harrowing part of the book for me. By then, you feel like you really know who this kid is, and a cellblock is the last place on Earth where he belongs. He was so naive and innocent; it was like Billy Budd thrown into a den of wolves. His portrait of life in prison is unforgettable--the strange people he met; the prison culture; amazing. But Gallagher endures and becomes stronger for it.

The book then jumps more than 35 years. Gallagher is 55 years old, the same age as Frederick II was when he died, and he decides to spend a year intensely involved in falconry, visiting famous falconers in Wyoming, Nebraska, and other places in America as well as in Britain and Europe. He also travels through southern Italy and Sicily, retracing the steps of Frederick II. Toward the end of this section, the two parts of his life come together in a moving climax.

I highly recommend this book.

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