

Sample Interview Questions with Rebecca K. O'Connor, author of *Lift*, a memoir.

What made you decide to become a falconer, or for that matter a bird trainer?

I've always been crazy about birds, I couldn't say why. It was my grandfather who accidentally introduced me to falconry and he was such a great storyteller that I couldn't get over the idea of it. Imagine a falcon, a wild bird that trusted you so much it would fly far and free yet come back to you.

Falconry seems to be a focused, time-consuming solitary endeavor. Do you feel you have made sacrifices in your life to pursue this sport?

I think we make sacrifices for everything that we're passionate about. You make sacrifices when you choose to commit yourself to one person in marriage or commit your life to raising children for 18 years. So, I suppose, yes. I have had to give up things in order to spend months and years chasing an unpredictable bird across the landscape. I'm certain though, that it was worth it.

So I'm guessing from this and from reading the book that you've never been married or had children?

I've never been opposed to marriage or children, but no, I haven't been married and I have no children. Who knows, though? It's never too late.

Your falcon hunts other birds for his food and it is obvious in the book that sometimes you have to be involved in killing. Doesn't it bother you as a woman and a bird lover to be a part of this?

Of course, it bothers me. It also makes me cognizant of the fact that I cannot exist without consuming resources and space that animals require, if not consuming the animals themselves. I've learned to be very careful about wasting my food and appreciating what I have. Whether it's a chicken McNugget or a personally harvested duck dinner, an animal I admire gave up its life for my meal. This means something to me now.

Don't you think it is cruel to keep falcons in captivity?

The falcons I hunt with were raised in captivity and have a choice whether or not to return. I can't brainwash them, because they honestly don't love me or even care about me. They care about meals, safety, and survival. So they don't get "Stockholm Syndrome". They choose to come back, so I feel confident I'm doing right by them.

Are there very many women falconers?

More than there used to be, but there still aren't many of us. As it is there are only about 2,000 falconers in the United States and only a small portion of them are women. It's not because we're not capable, I'm sure. Mostly, I think perhaps it has more to do balancing work and a family. I couldn't do both those things and be a falconer too. Most women focus on the most important thing in their life, their children, not their falconry. It's an important choice.

Are you saying that men forsake their families for falconry?

I don't know that I would say that exactly, but I could tell you story after story of falconry induced divorces.

If there aren't very many falconers, is falconry a dying sport in the United States?

I think it may be, but not because there aren't many falconers. I think we have a limited amount of time before the stretches of land that are needed to fly a falcon and the game species they prey on disappear forever. I hope I'm wrong. In fact, I'm a fundraiser for Ducks Unlimited for a living, working to ensure that habitat is preserved and rehabilitated. Conservation is that important to me. All the same, I worry.

Most of your book takes place in California and you really seem to love the landscape. Do you live there now? Would you ever leave?

Home is the land you bleed, cry and pray on. I've done plenty that in falconry and feel like I have intimate knowledge of the places that have sustained my falcons, hawks, and sometimes my soul. I love California, despite its issues. I always say I'm going to leave and I have a few times, but I keep coming back home and suspect I always will.

Do you still have Anakin?

Yes. He's still a handful and a risk taker, but he rarely flies away now and I cherish every extra season I have him in my life.

There is a lot of personal struggle in this memoir, what was the hardest part of writing it?

That's a tough question. So much of it was heart-wrenching in surprising ways. I guess what I never expected was that my mother would end up living with me halfway through writing the memoir. That was a journey in itself, but a good one. There's a lot of healing in this book as well as hard work.

Your mother left you when were four and disappeared for five years. She came back, but you grew up with your father's parents. A lot of the book deals with your relationship with your mother and forgiveness. Was it hard to forgive your mother?

No, it wasn't. So many people in our life do things that are wrong and never admit to their faults or ask forgiveness. My mom has always wanted to save our relationship and has jumped through fire to find ways to make up for leaving. It wasn't hard to forgive her at all.

Your grandfather is a very important character in your story. How has he influenced you life?

I miss my grandfather every day, but I feel grateful that he's an ongoing presence in my life, if only in my memories. He wasn't perfect, but it couldn't have been easy raising a little girl in your 70s. I recognize that some of the best things about me came from his modeling and love.

You made choices that some people would consider questionable when you were younger. There is a passage in LIFT about when you were a stripper. Why did you choose to put that in the book?

To me this book was very much about predator and prey. Women can be either and to me strippers are both. You are both preying on men and victimized by them. It's an unhealthy and dangerous place to be and I think I dodged a bullet by getting out. And in LIFT as well as life, it was a bullet I didn't want to have to ever dodge again. Predator and prey is the way of the world, but that doesn't mean you have to succumb to it. The ultimate lesson in survival is learning to love with your whole heart and embrace the risk without becoming a victim or an abuser.

What happened with your relationship with Adam?

Of course all of the names and defining characteristics of people have been changed in this book, but know that "Adam" is absolutely one of my best friends in the world.

Why did you decide to name the book LIFT?

In its strictest definition, lift is the force that keeps a bird in the air. And with a falcon named "Anakin", the moniker of the young Darth Vader in the Star Wars trilogy, how can I resist quoting Joseph Campbell saying, "You have to find the force within you." We all have lift, it's just a question of finding it.