

Charlotte McConaghy. *Migrations: A Novel*. Flatiron Books, 2020.

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Charlotte McConaghy's debut novel *Migrations* (2020) brings together the protagonist's planned suicide and journey of grief with an endangered bird's migratory path as an act of mourning that anticipates a future loss. Also published as *The Last Migration*, the novel follows Franny Stone from Ireland to Greenland to Antarctica as she tracks the Arctic tern and tries to recover her past and her future. While sharing some of the concerns of climate change fiction like animal extinction and habitat destruction, the book also functions as a trauma narrative, a meditation on loss, and a journey towards healing and freedom. By interweaving multiple forms of life and death with environmental interests, *Migrations* asks readers to consider how the present moment impacts what will be remembered, or what will be reduced to memory alone.

"The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here" (1). Anticipating a future without animal life, these haunting sentences open the novel and call attention to the impending loss of the world as we know it. Motivated by an intense urge towards freedom and haunted by her past, protagonist and narrator Franny Stone violates her prison parole to follow the Arctic tern on what may be its last migratory flight. Posing as an ornithologist who has placed trackers on three terns, Franny convinces the captain of a commercial fishing vessel to take her aboard on what may also be her journey towards death. Trusting that the birds will guide them to fish, the crew risk their lives to navigate unknown waters, weather dangerous storms, and evade law enforcement officers. As the boat moves south, Franny's mind wanders between past and present, and the narrative details her rootless childhood, emotional wounds, and contrasting instincts for death and life.

With animal species disappearing and the threat of Franny's voluntary death hanging over the novel, McConaghy's almost-apocalyptic imagery and haunting lyricism lend a sense of urgency to her work. Painting a frightening vision of the future, McConaghy's prose calls to mind Rachel Carson's groundbreaking book *Silent Spring* (1962), as well as writers of speculative fiction like J.G. Ballard, Octavia Butler, Cormac McCarthy, Margaret Atwood, and Paolo Bacigalupi. In the future setting of *Migrations*, rain forests are devoid of animals; wild monkeys, apes, and gorillas are extinct; open waters have been over-fished; and crowds

demonstrate against fishermen to call for bans on commercial fishing. To highlight how the living natural world may soon be only a memory, the narrator states, “Once it was the birds who gave birth to a fiercer me” (1). This subverts the fairy-tale indicator – now that the birds are dying, the possibility of rebirth and courage are also threatened.

Structurally, *Migrations* develops multiple story lines in parallel, simultaneously tracing the physical migration of the arctic terns, Franny’s life from childhood to the present, and her journey of grief from the current moment back to traumatic incidents. By drawing constant associations between the narrator’s story and her observations of natural life, the novel expresses a concept seen in Timothy Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* (2010), the recognition that all forms of life are intricately interconnected in a mesh of life. At the level of prose, McConaghy skillfully draws connections between Franny’s inner life and the physical world. For example, when Franny recovers the traumatic truth of how her mother disappeared years prior, she characterizes the lost memory as a leaf dropped from a tree: “How funny,” she says, “that such a thing should drop so delicately from my mind. A falling, fluttering leaf. What else have I lost that has fallen free?” (185). This poetic description of memory as delicate and ephemeral like a leaf resonates with the book’s treatment of memory in relation to trauma and grief.

Paradoxically, it is the heaviest memories of her mother’s suicide and her husband’s fatal accident that seem to have floated away from Franny, but this is only because she has buried them so deeply that she cannot remember the facts as they occurred.

Migrations moves quickly through time and space, thereby embodying the protagonist’s desire to be free and weightless like the birds she loves. Geographic settings in the book include places as widespread as Ireland, Greenland, the Labrador current, the coast of Australia, the Atlantic Ocean, and Antarctica. Each chapter or section break is labelled with a location, which allows the reader to follow the migration route and position the story in time and place, while emphasizing the interconnection of all life forms and reducing the human-centered sense of time. Time indicators are relative, such as “4 years ago”, and the present time is distinguished as “nesting season,” “migration season”, or “mating season” in accordance with the Arctic tern’s life cycle. The choice to delineate the present-moment of the narrative through bird seasons emphasizes the parallel migrations in the book: as the Arctic terns migrate south, Franny moves with them on a journey of grief, release, and ultimately healing.

While Franny drifts between reliving tragic moments and meditating on habitat loss, her narrative incorporates dramatic episodes such as near-deaths, run-ins with law enforcement, mistaken identities, a fatal car accident, and multiple sea rescues. Due to its fast pace and ample use of foreshadowing and flashbacks, the novel may feel contrived to the critical reader. And yet, McConaghy's lyrical and haunting prose draws the reader into a larger world, where sorrows expand like the sea and expressions of pain cut like winter winds. Franny describes loss and abandonment in a matter-of-fact way, and then juxtaposes her emotional scars with the ocean, declaring that "the rhythms of the sea's tides are the only things we humans have not yet destroyed" (14). In the end, it is the sea that saves Franny. Immersed in the frigid Antarctic Sea, she finds the courage to continue towards life and nurture her environment, thus contributing to rather than stealing from the mesh of life.

In addition to the compelling story line that allows Franny to reveal her scars at her own pace, McConaghy's attention to the beauty of our world makes this novel an inspiring and thought-provoking read. By weaving Franny's story into the movement of the birds and the sea, *Migrations* poetically meditates on ecological love and loss, and expands the survival instinct into an other-focused force that can nurture life. As Franny says, "A life's impact can be measured by what it gives and what it leaves behind, but it can also be measured by what it steals from the world" (90). Through Franny's voice, this novel asks readers to look at their surroundings and act to preserve beauty, rather than reducing life to memories that fall away like dying leaves.