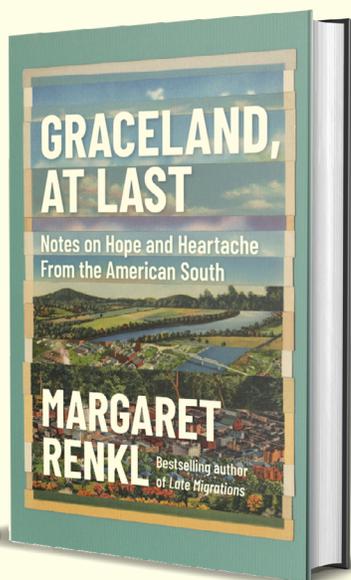


GRACELAND, AT LAST

NOTES ON HOPE AND HEARTACHE FROM THE AMERICAN SOUTH

BY MARGARET RENKL

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. In the introduction, Margaret Renkl admits these essays “began in grief” [1]. How does she express grief throughout each section? Give examples. Did Renkl change your perspective on suffering and loss?

2. In the section Flora and Fauna, [11] Renkl’s writing ranges from the curiosity of critters in her own backyard to serious matters of near extinction and other environmental threats. What emotions do these chapters evoke? How does this section establish Renkl’s viewpoint living in the South going into the rest of *Graceland, At Last*?

3. In the essay “Make America Graze Again,” [31] Renkl highlights Zach Richardson and his flock of sheep grazing urban landscapes of unwanted vegetation. What are other examples of outside-the-box thinking Renkl wants to bring attention to in *Graceland, At Last*?

4. Renkl challenges the Republican agenda in 2019 and proclaims, “It’s the death of compassionate democracy by a thousand paper cuts” [63], and follows this statement with a triumphant chapter written in 2021 where she writes, “Georgia is the clearest proof yet that this is not our grandfather’s Southland anymore. And it never will be again” [68]. Explore the tensions Renkl presents between Southern politicians and Southern voters.

5. Were there any chapters in the Religion and Politics [51] section that challenged your expectations of Southern political and religious perspectives? Which stories and research surprised you, and which didn’t?

6. “We may never agree on what real justice looks like, but we will always know mercy when we see it. And mercy will do” [120] Renkl writes in the Social Justice [103] section. Where do you see this sentiment come through in other chapters?

7. In the Environment [153] section, Renkl tackles pesticides, pollution, biodiversity loss, ecosystem fragmentation, and climate change, filling the chapters with personal anecdotes. How does Renkl’s form of storytelling support her environmental activist writing?

8. Throughout *Graceland, At Last*, Renkl’s tone ranges from sorrowful to inspired to confrontational, showing the depth of emotion in these topics. Which tones and approaches stuck with you?

9. How do the varied subjects in *Graceland, At Last* give credibility to Renkl’s authority to write about the South every week for *The New York Times*? How does her work expand what journalism can accomplish?

10. *Graceland, At Last* covers roughly five years of weekly essays. Discuss the choice to separate the essays by topic rather than organizing them chronologically. What thematic threads can you find connecting the sections?

A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

“In this politically polarized culture, it can be hard to avoid succumbing to vitriol, hard to avoid hating people who don’t think the way we think. Too often I read the news in a state of fury or despair, my blood boiling or my heart in my throat. Too often I am trying not to cry. But even when such feelings cannot be avoided—even when fury and despair are absolutely required of any thinking, feeling person—eventually I find myself searching for a way to get beyond the ugliness. Because fury can blind me to what is still good in the world, and despair can make me want to give up the fight altogether. So I look to the person standing off to the side, quietly making things just a little bit better. I look for the data hinting that maybe, just maybe, the outrage of the day is an outlier, or at least more complicated in real life than it is on Twitter. I hope *Graceland, At Last*, in its own small way, can act as a kind of antidote to fury and despair for readers, too. I hope it can act as a reminder that the world is still miraculous, and people are still good. That this is no time to give up.”

—MARGARET RENKL

SYNOPSIS

Graceland, At Last is a collection of sixty essays originally published in *The New York Times* between 2017 and 2021. Per Margaret Renkl’s byline in the *Times*, she writes about “the flora, fauna, politics and culture of the American South.” These essays are illustrative of that range, and *Graceland, At Last* is divided into six sections, outlined below. Throughout, readers will find throughout the same qualities that keep Renkl’s fans returning to her *Times* column each week: natural beauty, human decency, and persistent hope.

The essays within Flora & Fauna will feel familiar to readers of Renkl’s previous book, *Late Migrations*, which alternated its focus between her family and the natural world. In this section, Renkl shares stories of hope about imperiled plants and creatures, like the Tennessee coneflower and bald eagle. She finds beauty in the “misunderstood, maligned” rattlesnake, mole, and skink. She makes nature seem newly miraculous, accessible whether in city, suburb, or countryside.

Renkl writes from the perspective of a liberal, Christian Southerner in Politics & Religion. In these essays, she travels to Georgia to see President Jimmy Carter teach Sunday school, evaluates the contradictions of red-state politics, and considers both gun violence and gun reform. She assesses the ways in which politicians and legislatures have let down their constituents—and in the next section, Social Justice, she looks at the activists, journalists, and ordinary people who respond through community action. Whether it’s the story of a neighborhood defying ICE as it comes for one of their own, or a tribute to Representative John Lewis, or an account of teenagers organizing a youth march against police violence, these essays paint a portrait of resistance and hope.

In Environment, Renkl returns to the natural world, this time with an emphasis on the ways human harm and help it. Here, she looks at the effects of lawn insecticides and herbicides on the birds and bees we love. She describes her complicated feelings about a feral cat—a danger to songbirds—who is poisoned by a neighbor. She applauds organizations that plant trees in cities, and argues that fatalism is not the right mindset for those concerned about climate change.

Readers of *Late Migrations* will also find familiar themes in Family & Community. Renkl shows us not just the importance of these ideas in Southern life—like a museum exhibit celebrating quilts, or the endangerment of neighborhood ties as the cost of living explodes in Nashville—but the importance of these things in her life. The family wedding rings she wears as a protective talisman. The power of condolence letters. A downsized but tender pandemic wedding.

Renkl concludes with Arts & Culture, moving from the musician John Prine to a ballet based on an elusive historical figure to college football to the question of what makes a Southern writer. In the final essay in the book, she recounts her stymied attempts to visit the home of Elvis Presley—before she joyously makes her way to Graceland, at last.



Graceland, At Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache From the American South by Margaret Renkl

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