

Graceland, At Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache from the American South

Margaret Renkl

Milkweed Editions (Sep 14, 2021)

Hardcover \$26.00 (304pp)

978-1-57131-184-9

A hearty “bless your heart” to those who misunderstand the South, the essays of Margaret Renkl’s *Graceland, at Last* vivify an often maligned region.

Renkl is one angle of the face of the changing South: she cares about the environment, social justice, and her faith, and she sees no contradictions there. While you’re unlikely to ever hear her praise the Tennessee General Assembly, she has plenty of love for her neighbors—including Nashville’s flora and fauna.

Renkl begins her tour through the disillusioning Trump years in a place of peace: her own backyard. She writes about its wildflowers and sunning skinks, butterflies and coiling snakes, with reverence and delight; she honors the essential wildness of nature, too, noting that predators are doing their jobs, just as pollinators do. Here, a rattlesnake is not a cause for fright, but “a symbol that you’re in a wild place, a special place.”

These collected columns are not just a celebration of Nashville’s green spaces, though. Among them are fierce indictments of political malfeasance. Regressive legislation is credited with “the death of compassionate democracy by a thousand paper cuts,” and politicians and Christian voters are called to task over their cruelty toward their neighbors, on issues ranging from insurance access to immigration.

Come for the righteousness, stay for the linguistic sorcery: these entries are as wont to laud “a seedling muscling through the soil” as they are to draw lessons from a fox in a stroller, or a college athlete breaking a glass ceiling during Covid-19. Charming accounts of vengeful mall Santas, roadside attractions as proof of humanity’s wit and wile, and drawing peace from family heirlooms round the irresistible collection out.

Renkl observes that great writers “know their communities from the inside out”; *Graceland, At Last* proves the maxim with its generous helpings of Southern hospitality.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2021)

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