



★ **Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss**

Margaret Renkl

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The short, potent essays of Margaret Renkl's *Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss* are objects as worthy of marvel and study as the birds and other creatures they observe. Linked stories concentrate on Renkl's family, her childhood in Alabama, and her current home in suburban Nashville. Her memories and definitions of her surroundings and family members always come with awareness of the humming, buzzing natural world around her.

Brief essays join together to create a whole, linked by themes and recurring characters. Individual scenes are compelling, rich, satisfying, and always delivered with the assurance that they are powerful on their own. None are weighed down with unnecessary explanations.

In "Secret," a neighbor's old hackberry tree has an hidden interior life until spring storm winds split it open and reveal what's inside. Renkl's mother is another collection standout, who because of her personality and mental health refuses to fit into the routines of obedient Southern motherhood.

The essays are arranged in a way that mirrors the experience of grief. They focus, in turn, on routines, on what's happening outside of the window, or on memories, only to return to acknowledging mortality. In a later essay, Renkl describes returning home after dropping out of graduate school and making a daily visit to the video store; each day, she comes home with a copy of *Harold and Maude*, and Maude crows—in her fabulous, lusty, crackly voice—about "the great circle of life!" That circle is what's observed with such dedication throughout the collection.

As startling images arise, each on their own clean pages, the book establishes a sense that Renkl must have an endless supply of closely observed incidents to her name. It is very easy, very early on, to progress with the absolute faith that this book is a very fine one.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (July/August 2019)

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