

Parkdale Book Club

Migrations, February 2023

Schedule – 2nd Saturday each month, 10 am, Zoom

March 11	<i>The Art of Leaving</i> by Ayelet Tsabari	Roz
April 8	<i>The Children's Blizzard</i> by Melanie Benjamin	Margaret
May 13	<i>Sufferance</i> by Thomas King	Janine
June 10	<i>The Woman Outside My Door</i> by Rachel Ryan	Sue

March Book Club -- *The Art of Leaving*

Our March book is Roz' nomination, *The Art of Leaving* by Ayelet Tsabari.

Amazon: "Ayelet Tsabari was 21 years old the first time she left Tel Aviv with no plans to return. Restless after two turbulent mandatory years in the Israel Defense Forces, Tsabari longed to get away. It was not the never-ending conflict that drove her, but the grief that had shaken the foundations of her home. The loss of Tsabari's beloved father in years past had left her alienated and exiled within her own large Yemeni family and at odds with her Mizrahi identity. By leaving, she would be free to reinvent herself and to rewrite her own story.



For nearly a decade, Tsabari travelled, through India, Europe, the US and Canada, as though her life might go stagnant without perpetual motion. She moved fast and often because—as in the Intifada—it was safer to keep going than to stand still. Soon the act of leaving—jobs, friends and relationships—came to feel most like home.

But a series of dramatic events forced Tsabari to examine her choices and her feelings of longing and displacement. By periodically returning to Israel, Tsabari began to examine her Jewish-Yemeni background and the Mizrahi identity she had once rejected, as well as unearthing a family history that had been untold for years. What she found resonated deeply with her own immigrant experience and struggles with new motherhood. Beautifully written, frank and poignant, *The Art of Leaving* is a courageous coming-of-age story that reflects on identity and belonging and that explores themes of family and home—both inherited and chosen." ❖

Zoom link for March 11th Book Club

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82432011683?pwd=SEgwSFFIOTRZODVtSmVuYW1vOXNwdz09>

Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683

Passcode: 284356

Attention!

There are two books with the same title. We are reading *The Art of Leaving*, a memoir by Ayelet Tsabari. We are NOT reading *The Art of Leaving*, a romance novel by Anna Stothard.

Thanks, Joan, for noticing this on Goodreads.

Migrations

by Charlotte McConaghy

Eleven of us gathered on Zoom to discuss *Migrations*. “Nothing is as it seems” in this book that is full of mystery and intrigue, with layers of complex issues. There are so many different themes: dualities; self-destructiveness; hypocrisy; wandering; strength and determination; and more! And the love story – the impulsiveness of the mating (Franny & Niall) and the match between them “This is how he teaches himself to know something, to love something.”

Here are our reflections ...



Set in a dystopian future where most animals are extinct, Franny follows the last migration of the Arctic terns from the north to the south pole. She is on her own migration and the story is broken into pieces that the reader is to puzzle

together. It is a haunting, lyrical elegy for the state of the earth and how humans have decimated it. It is a love story, beautifully told and ends on a slightly hopeful note. The writer is perhaps overly ambitious, writing a mystery, a psychological analysis, a climatology study and a several character studies of the disenfranchised.



I liked the book very much. I liked the surprises that were introduced about the character Franny. Real twists. I found the following of the terns quite suspenseful at times. I liked Franny’s friendship with Ennis. It was interesting she ended up living with Penny. I was happy at the end that Franny decided to keep living. I found the entire book interesting and suspenseful.



Another little gem re *Migrations* –

‘And then there are the cravings ... oh, la!
A woman may crave to be near water, or be belly down, her face in the earth, smelling the wild smell.

She might have to drive into the wind.
She may have to plant something, pull things out of the ground or put them into the ground.

She may have to knead and bake, rapt in dough up to her elbows.

She may have to trek into the hills, leaping from rock to rock trying out her voice against the mountain.

She may need hours of starry nights where the stars are like face powder spilt on a black marble floor.

She may feel she will die if she doesn’t dance naked in a thunderstorm, sit in perfect silence, return home ink-stained, paint-stained, tear-stained, moon-stained.’

Clarissa Pinkola Estés,
*Women Who Run with the Wolves:
Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype.*



I wasn’t sure of this book in the beginning as it started out to me being a book about the science of migration, which really didn’t interest me. But as I moved into the book, then I could hardly put it down. The suspense of *what next* intrigued me. I did find flipping back and forth between now and before a bit difficult, but it helped to understand where Franny’s mind was. I didn’t realize until quite late in the book that Niall was one of the persons who died and that Franny spent time in jail for the possible murder of 2 people. Once I finished the book, I truly believe the accident was not intentional but rather due to winter conditions. Since Franny had been drinking then, for sure, she shouldn’t have been at the wheel. I believe her judgement was poorer than could have been otherwise.

The way the author created the characters I felt was good. I loved Samuel and how he was with Franny on the boat Saghani. I also felt that Ennis Malone and Franny were very similar in the fact that they both had a hidden story that neither was willing to share. I believe they became very close, looking out for each other because of their similarities. Ennis was willing to risk everything to get Franny to Antarctica. Even though he didn't know her whole story, he felt the importance of this trip to Franny.

I felt this was a great story about becoming a sort of soul mate without even knowing much about each other – e.g., Franny and Niall, then Franny and Ennis.

How Franny's mom left her was a bit of a shock, and to me it was interesting that the person who she ended up with at the end of the story was her father who also spent time in prison for killing.

To me this was a different story about family, life experiences, and maybe even compulsive behavior. I do wonder "What happened to Ennis?"



I loved this book both times I read it and had lots of tears while reading. Tears even while typing the quotations from it that I wanted to capture for this discussion. When I came to the discussion questions provided at the end of the Kindle edition, I had a queasy feeling – they felt like taking a beautiful creature, pinning it to a display board, eviscerating it. Too intellectual analysis, when I still had tears in my eyes from the power of the writing.



There was a significant strand of **dualities** running through the book:

- "I am altogether too alive for calm."
- Franny's sleep-walking – two selves, two parts of the brain – duality.
- "There are two worlds. One is made of water and earth, of rock and minerals. It has a core, a mantle and a crust, and oxygen for

breathing. The other is made of fear. I have inhabited each and know one to feel deceptively like the other."

- Phantom limb: "two toes on my right foot that I can feel tingling as though with the return of heat; strange because they were cut off"
- Niall: "There's a difference between wandering and leaving. In truth, you've never once left me."
- Jenny's attitude toward Franny (condemning her and then advocating for her), and even towards her birds (collecting them, but then unable to re-imprison them when Franny released them).
- "It's not that I want us to sink or anything, but that was exciting."
- "I can understand wanting to be at sea ... I have loved the sea all my life. But fishing?" and losing a huge catch to save the turtle. The sailors were fishers, but also people living in the extinction apocalypse.
- Self-destructiveness through obsession/compulsion, an aspect of the duality.

Hypocrisy:

- "appalled. How can it be in their blood to kill unreservedly?"
- "It has been decided by our leaders that economic growth is more important. That the extinction crisis is an acceptable trade for their greed."
- "Saving specific animals purely on the basis of what they offer humanity may be practical, but wasn't this attitude the problem to begin with? Our overwhelming, annihilating selfishness?"
- "It's like standing at the bottom of a mountain. I have no way to scale, and I'm exhausted, I'm exhausted by basil and his small, selfish world, and I'm exhausted by my own hypocrisy, because I'm just as human, and just as responsible as he is, and so, in the end, I slumped back in my seat and close my mouth."

Wandering:

- “I’m not good at being indoors.”
- “In Australia I sound Irish. In Ireland everyone thinks I’m Australian. Since the very beginning I’ve been flickering between, unable to hold fast to either” -- wandering in accent too.
- “It isn't fair to be the kind of creature who is able to love but unable to stay.”
- “There’s a compass in my heart that leads me not to true north but to true sea.”
- “Galway. Your life. Isn’t that where it is?’ I don’t know the answer to that. I had thought my life was just here, with me.”
- “I never worked out how to be relied upon and also free.”
- Song *Wanderlust* by Connie Kaldor -- <https://www.conniekaldor.com/moonlight-grocery>

Franny’s strength and determination:

- rescuing the boys whose boat was caught in the current
- getting out of the Antarctic water at the end: “I can't move to pull on my clothes except that somehow I do, and I can't stand on two feet except that somehow I do, and I can't walk, there's no way I can walk, except I do. I take step after step after step after step.”

Love letter to the earth:

- “We’re the only planet that has oceans. In all the known universe, we’re the only one sitting in the perfect spot for them, not too hot and not too cold, and it’s the only reason we’re alive, because it’s the ocean that creates the oxygen we need to breathe.”
- “Mam used to tell me to look for the clues. “The clues to what?” I asked the first time. “To life. They are hidden everywhere.”
- “The lighthouse is remote enough that it’s not automatic, but still manned, and as Gammy tells me the story of her family and how they’ve always kept it, passed from generation to generation, I feel her deep sense of home. I can feel it in the earth, too, when I get out of the car and walk upon the rocks. It’s in the sky

and the roaring ocean and the keening of the wind, it’s in the way she strides over her land and into her lighthouse; she owns this place and it owns her, tangible and unarguable. What must it be like to be bound so deeply and willingly to a place?” – lighthouse – keeping sailors safe.

**Love letter to birds:**

- “They have been here for two hundred million years,” he says, “and until recently there were ten thousand species. They evolved to go in search of food, traveling farther than any other animal to survive, and thus they colonized the earth. From the oilbird, which lived in pitch-black caves, to the bar-headed goose, which bred only on the desolate Tibetan plateau. From the rufous hummingbird, which survived in the freezing altitude of fourteen thousand feet to the Rüppell’s griffon vulture, which could fly as high as a commercial airplane. These extraordinary creatures were undoubtedly the most successful on earth, because they courageously learned to exist anywhere.”
- “Creatures that have learned to survive anything, everything, except us.” “these creatures who think nothing of having wings.”
- Murmurations.
- There is nothing so disturbing as a creature born to flight being bound to dull lifelessness.
- “The crows began to follow me.” “They’ve declared the crow extinct.”
- “We ate the birds” – so sad – **Feather Thief**

Eulogy:

- “If the animals have died it will not have been quietly. It will not have been without a desperate fight. If they've died, all of them, it's because we made the world impossible for them.”
- “(Reading) was a way to leave without really leaving.”
- “It's not really answers they want? It's simply remembering what it feels like to love creatures that aren't human. Nameless sadness, the fading away of the birds. The fading away of the animals. How lonely it will be here, when it's just us.”
- “There won't be any more journeys after this one, no more ocean is explored. And maybe that's why I am filled with calm. My life has been a migration without a destination.”

Magical writing:

- “beg myself to live inside this evening”
- “...tears from slipping down my cheeks. One of them drops onto the photo, distorting, my grandmother's face, drowning her. I wipe it off, so she can breathe again.”
- “an erratic pulse in my veins that I recognize as the marriage between excitement and desperation. I wish there were a word for this feeling. I know it so well, perhaps I ought to name it myself.”
- “It's not life I'm tired of, with its astonishing ocean currents and layers of ice and all the delicate feathers that make up a wing. It's myself.”

Associations:

- Reminds me of *The Glass Hotel* – women running away to sea, mother/daughter.
- *After the Flood* by Montag
- “... enormous island of plastic, and there are fish and seabirds and seals dead upon its shore.” In *If Cats Disappeared from the World*, the main character is given the option to trade an extra day of life for disappearing something from the world. In that situation, what do I choose to disappear? I would choose this.



One of the Goodreads commenters noted that the car accident can be understood in light of Franny's severe mental illness. I read the whole book 2x without ever focusing on this woman has a mental illness. But when I do focus on Franny's psychology, I think that the environmental situation – losing animals and birds – is conducive of mental illness. Being alive in the transitional stage (having crow friends in childhood and in adulthood hearing that crows have been declared extinct) would be harder than being alive later in the apocalypse, when it has been generations since anyone saw a living crow.

**Cool Facts about Arctic Terns**

- Arctic Terns migrate from pole to pole; birds in North America travel around 25,000 miles each year.
- Downy Arctic Tern hatchlings come in two colors: gray or brown. And chicks from the same nest aren't always the same color.
- Arctic Terns can live for decades, but they usually do not start breeding until they are 3 or 4 years old.
- The oldest recorded Arctic Tern was at least 34 years old, when it was recaptured and rereleased during a banding operation in Maine.
- When molting its wing feathers during the winter, the Arctic Tern rarely flies; instead, it spends much of its time resting on small blocks of ice at the edge of the pack ice.

From the Cornell Lab



This book reminded me a little bit of Emily St. John Mandel's book, *The Glass Hotel* – probably because it featured a young woman on a boat. (I notice that St. John Mandel wrote a positive tribute on the book jacket.)

Migrations kept me engaged and I read it in just a few days. McConaghy kept it interesting by not revealing everything all at once. We got little snippets at a time about Franny's past rather than having everything unfold chronologically. This writing style kept me curious about what events from her past might explain her claustrophobia and constant need to get away, her nightmares and dangerous sleep-walking, how/why her mother abandoned her, and how/why she ended up in jail. Franny was a mysterious character and we got to know her slowly, just as Niall did.

Franny's relationship with Niall was quite fascinating. I think, at first, he was intrigued by her but I believe he grew to truly love her. I liked how he stood up for her with his mother. Franny's first introduction to Penny was horrible and I loved how Franny responded to her when she was grilling her and assuming she'd married Niall for his money.

I was surprised to find out that Niall had been killed before Franny went on her quest to follow the terns. We don't learn that until quite near the end. And, even later, we learn about Niall's will and his request to have his ashes scattered with the terns. It added another dimension to explain how important it was to Franny to follow the terns on their migration.

The book had quite an impact on me about **environmental issues**, climate change and the impact on wildlife. Other writers (e.g., Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver) have used fiction writing to raise consciousness and action about these topics. I liked the educational and political aspects of this book.

I liked the title and how we learn about individual migrations as well as the literal migration of the Arctic tern. It was fascinating to learn that this bird migrates from pole to pole. Incredible stamina.

The **Arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)** is a tern in the family Laridae. This bird has a circumpolar breeding distribution covering the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Europe (as far south as Brittany), Asia, and North America (as far south as Massachusetts). The species is strongly migratory, seeing two summers each year as it migrates along a convoluted route from its northern breeding grounds to the Antarctic coast for the southern summer and back again about six months later. Recent studies have shown average annual round-trip lengths of about 70,900 km (44,100 mi) for birds nesting in Iceland and Greenland and about 48,700 km (30,300 mi) for birds nesting in the Netherlands. These are by far the longest migrations known in the animal kingdom. The Arctic tern nests once every one to three years (depending on its mating cycle).

(from *Wikipedia*)

I liked the way **Franny's relationship with Ennis** evolved as the story unfolded. He was dismissive of her at the beginning but then was committed to following the terns. He had secrets of his own and they both shared feeling guilty about past choices. They grew to really care about each other and, in the end, they both got to see the colony of terns in Antarctica.

I thought for sure the book was going to end with Fanny drowning in the ocean, which was her intent from the beginning, so I was surprised and relieved when she changed her mind.

McConaghy evoked a range of emotions in me – righteous indignation, concern, elation, sadness, compassion, hope. I like that the book ended on a hopeful note. It feels like there is still time to change things in a positive way. ❖

Large DDT Dump off the LA Coast

During our discussion of *Migrations*, Lindsay mentioned the large DDT dump off of the LA coast.



Discarded leaking barrels sit 3000 ft. deep on the ocean floor near where she lives. Overwhelmed scientists investigating the discarded barrels discovered the dumpsite was much larger than expected and said it was like “trying to count stars in the Milky Way.” Lindsay lives just to the right of the Palos Verdes Peninsula shown in this map.



Read more about the “DDT graveyard” in Rosanna Xia’s article in the April 26, 2021 issue of the *LA Times*.

<https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2021-04-26/ddt-waste-barrels-off-la-coast-shock-california-scientists>

(Thanks to Lindsay for sending the link.) ❖

What else are you reading?

Please send us notes on what you’re reading besides the next book-club book, *The Art of Leaving*. What are you enjoying? What would you recommend we bypass? Please send to sloanelm@shaw.ca.

Lee: I just finished reading *The Barren Grounds* by David A. Robertson. Apparently, it’s a child’s book but I really liked it. I also read *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel. I didn’t like it at all. I found it a silly book. I read *The Maid*, by Nita Prose and I enjoyed it very much. I also read *Scarborough* by Catherine Hernandez, which I found interesting. *Open House* by Elizabeth Berg was an easy read. I wouldn’t recommend it but it passed the time very quickly.

Douglas Preston & Lincoln Childs: *Still Life with Crows* – murder mystery

Rumaan Alam: *Leave the World Behind* – apocalyptic.

Michael Connelly: *Desert Star* – latest in the Hieronymus Bosch series.

Michael Koryta: *When She Wakes* – murder mystery.

Abi Daré: *The Girl with the Louding Voice* – Nigerian voice.

Dean Koontz: *The Watchers* – the only one of his books I’ve read. If you like dogs, you’ll enjoy it.

C. Robert Cargill: *Day Zero* – robot revolution, with a flavour of Calvin & Hobbes.

Nominations for next year

We have 12 nominations for next year, so far! (If, as is sometimes the case, your nomination has been misplaced by the absent-minded, please contact me at sloanelm@shaw.ca to correct this.)

1. ***The Boy in the Woods*** by Maxwell Smart (not agent 86) nominated by Lee.
2. Beth added a nomination: ***Demon Copperhead*** by Barbara Kingsolver.
3. ***Good Eggs*** by Rebecca Hardiman, nominated by Debbie.
4. Lynn is nominating Genki Kawamura's ***If Cats Disappeared from the World***.
5. Doreen is recommending two books for a fun change of pace, from her summer reading for next year: ***The Invention of Wings*** by Sue Monk Kidd.
6. Heidi suggested a couple of books her Book Club read that she said were really good, fun reads, both Canadian Authors: ***Letters to Singapore*** by Kelly Kaur – The setting is a University of Calgary student writing home.
7. Doreen's second: ***The Little Old Lady Who Broke All the Rules***, by Catherina Ingleman Sunberg.
8. ***Maggie*** by Elizabeth Day – Sue writes, "My daughter-in-law read it and gave it to me to read, a wonderful story taking many different turns throughout the book."
9. From Lynn: Shelby Van Pelt's ***Remarkably Bright Creatures***.
10. Heidi's second suggestion is ***The Shoe on The Roof*** by Will Ferguson.
11. ***Son of Elsewhere*** by Elamin Abdelmehdi is nominated by Lee.
12. Deb is nominating Sara Whinman's ***Still Life***.

Please add to the list of nominations with any book you think would make for a good discussion. Our parameters are quite inclusive, with a consideration only that the book be available in other formats in addition to hardback by the time we're reading it. Send nominations to sloanelm@shaw.ca. ❖

Great Movie! 👍 👍



In our December Newsletter, we told you that ***A Man Called Otto*** would be released in early January. The movie is based on a book we read a few years ago – ***A Man Called Ove*** by Swedish author Fredrik Backman.

The movie gets two thumbs up from me! I was wondering if the American adaptation would have the charm of the Swedish version but Tom Hanks definitely pulls it off as grumpy Otto. Like the book, the movie is a beautiful story of the healing capacity of a supportive community.

Mariana Treviño is fantastic as the feisty Marisol who inserts herself and her family into Otto's life in the most beautiful way. Tom Hanks' real-life youngest son, Truman Hanks, plays the younger Otto in the movie. If you haven't had a chance to see it yet, it is still showing in Landmark and Cineplex theatres in Calgary. I highly recommend it. Bring tissues. ❖

Literary Kaleidoscope

Literary Kaleidoscope has resumed in-person meetings on the 3rd Wednesday of each month at Marda Loop Community Centre, 3130 16th St SW. Admission is \$10. Presentations begin at 9:30 and run between 60 and 75 minutes.

March 15 – Jane Cawthorne's *Patterson House* (2022). Presenter: Dr. Aritha van Herk. ❖