

The Comfort of Crows: A Backyard Year

by Margaret Renkl



About the Book

From beloved *New York Times* opinion writer Margaret Renkl comes a luminous book that traces the passing of seasons, both personal and natural.

In *THE COMFORT OF CROWS*, Margaret Renkl presents a literary devotional: 52 chapters that follow the creatures and plants in her backyard over the course of a year. As we move through the seasons --- from a crow spied on New Year's Day, its resourcefulness and sense of community setting a theme for the year, to the lingering bluebirds of December, revisiting the nest box they used in spring --- what develops is a portrait of joy and grief: joy in the ongoing pleasures of the natural world, and grief over winters that end too soon and songbirds that grow fewer and fewer.

Along the way, we also glimpse the changing rhythms of a human life. Grown children, unexpectedly home during the pandemic, prepare to depart once more. Birdsong and night-blooming flowers evoke generations past. The city and the country where Renkl raised her family transform a little more with each passing day. And the natural world, now in visible flux, requires every ounce of hope and commitment from the author --- and from us. For, as Renkl writes, "radiant things are bursting forth in the darkest places, in the smallest nooks and deepest cracks of the hidden world."

With 52 original color artworks by the author's brother, Billy Renkl, *THE COMFORT OF CROWS* is a lovely and deeply moving book from a cherished observer of the natural world.

Discussion Guide

1. The book opens with a New Year's game called "First Bird." If you had to choose a bird or other animal to represent this year for you, what would it be and why?
2. The book begins with two epigraphs, including one by Mary Oliver: "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper

work.? What does this quote mean? How does paying attention change our lives, and in what ways is it ?work??

3. Epigraphs precede many of the essays in the book. Did this add to or change your reading experience? Did you have a favorite? Why?

4. There are beautiful scenes throughout the book surrounding communities of animals (crows, bluebirds, etc.) and how they behave together. What can we take away from their interactions to help us be better humans?

5. In *THE COMFORT OF CROWS*, each season ends up having its own distinct personality. Do you have a favorite season? If so, what makes it special? Has your favorite season changed over time?

6. Throughout the book, Renkl discusses how the seasons have shifted as the effects of climate change take an increasingly large impact on the environment. What are three actions you can take to help your wild neighbors as their environment changes?

7. There are many examples of the resiliency of nature, as well as its fragility, throughout the book. What do you find to be the most surprising thing about nature? What do you think our landscape will look like 10, 15 or 20 years from now?

8. How do the changing seasons connect us back to previous generations?

9. Discuss how the changing seasons connect back to the seasons of life (leaving for school, coming back for the holidays or summer break, etc.). What seasons do you have strong memories associated with?

10. Renkl's brother created all the art in the book. Do you have any siblings? Have you ever worked on a big project together? What do you imagine it would be like?

11. How did the art affect your reading of each chapter? Did you have a favorite? Could you always see the connection between the art and the writing?

12. What is the role of faith in the book, religious or otherwise?

Author Bio

Margaret Renkl is the author of *THE COMFORT OF CROWS: A Backyard Year*. Her earlier books are *LATE MIGRATIONS: A Natural History of Love and Loss* and *GRACELAND, AT LAST: Notes on Hope and Heartache from the American South*. She is a contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*, where her essays appear weekly. The founding editor of Chapter 16, a daily literary publication of Humanities Tennessee, and a graduate of Auburn University and the University of South Carolina, she lives in Nashville.

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