

The Comfort of Crows by Margaret Renkl

Margaret Renkl is an award-winning author and contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*. A graduate of Auburn University and the University of South Carolina, she currently lives in Nashville. Her other works include *Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss* and *Graceland, at Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache from the American South*. *The Comfort of Crows: A Backyard Year* won the 2024 Southern Book Prize and was a Read Between the Ravines title.

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 and how did you see it illustrated throughout the book? 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 quote? Why?
4. Discuss the artwork throughout the book, all created by the author's brother. How did the art affect your reading of each chapter? Did you have a favorite piece? Could you always see the connection between the art and the writing?
5. In the book, each season ends up having its own distinct personality. Did you agree with Renkl's depictions of the seasons? Do you have a favorite season, and if so, what makes it special? Has your favorite season changed over time?
6. Renkl draws many parallels between the changing of the literal seasons and the different seasons of life we all experience (leaving for school, coming back for the holidays or summer break, having an "empty nest" after all our children have moved out, etc.). Do you have strong memories associated with any particular season? How do the changing seasons connect us back to previous generations?
7. How did the use of seasons as an organizing framework for the narrative affect your experience of the book? Did it change how you thought about the passage of time in Renkl's life or in your own?
8. At one point, during the winter season, Renkl writes, "Paying attention to what is happening to the natural world can be a form of self-torment, and I sometimes wonder how much longer I can keep seeing the losses that surround me and not descend into a kind of disrepair that might as well be called madness." Do you experience similar feelings of "climate anxiety"? How do you manage them?



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9. Despite grieving as she observes the effects of climate change in her own yard, Renkl still finds solace in the beauty of the natural world. Discuss how she grapples with these conflicting feelings. Does she manage to find balance?
10. Throughout the book, Renkl discusses how the seasons have shifted as the effects of climate change have an increasingly large impact on the environment. Is this something you have noticed where you live? What might you be able to do in your own backyard to help your wild neighbors as their environment changes?
11. 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 ten, fifteen, or twenty years from now?
12. There are many beautifully narrated essays describing communities of animals and how they behave together, along with scenes of Renkl interacting with the animals in her yard—and sometimes debating whether she should have or not. Were there any moments Renkl described that you found particularly memorable?
13. Consider this quote: “At heart, most people are good. This is one of my cardinal articles of faith, the principle upon which I have staked my entire conscious life.” Do you agree? What is the role of faith in the book, religious or otherwise?
14. At one point, Renkl writes, “The world will always be beautiful to those who look for beauty.” Yet oftentimes we find ourselves rushing through our days, seemingly without time to look for beauty. Did reading this book make you reconsider your own relationship with nature? What are some ways you might cultivate awareness and practice observation of the natural world in your daily life?
15. In the author’s note, Renkl acknowledges that while the narrative of the book unfolds “within the span of a single year, this book actually took several years to write.” Does knowing this change your perception of the book?