



GRACELAND, AT LAST

Notes on Hope and
Heartache From the
American South

By Margaret Renkl

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Discussion Questions

1. In the introduction, Margaret Renkl admits these essays “began in grief” [1]. How does she express grief throughout each section? Give examples. Did Renkl change your perspective on suffering and loss?

2. In the section “Flora and Fauna,” [11] Renkl’s writing ranges from the curiosity of critters in her own backyard to serious matters of near extinction, biodiversity loss, ecosystem fragmentation, and other environmental threats. What emotions do these chapters evoke? How does this section establish Renkl’s viewpoint living in the South going into the rest of *Graceland, At Last*?

3. In the essay “Make America Graze Again,” Renkl highlights Zach Richardson and his flock of sheep grazing urban landscapes of unwanted vegetation. What are other examples of outside-the-box thinking Renkl wants to bring attention to in *Graceland, At Last*?

4. Renkl challenges the Republican agenda in 2019 and proclaims, “It’s the death of compassionate democracy by a thousand paper cuts” [63], and follows this statement with a triumphant chapter written in 2021 where she writes, “Georgia is the clearest proof yet that this is not our grandfather’s Southland anymore. And it never will be again.” [68] Explore the tensions Renkl presents between Southern politicians and Southern voters.

5. Were there any chapters in the “Religion and Politics” [51] section that challenged your expectations of Southern political and religious perspectives? Which stories and research surprised you, and which didn’t?

6. “We may never agree on what real justice looks like, but we will always know mercy when we see it. And mercy will do” [120] Renkl writes in the “Social Justice” [103] section. Where do you see this sentiment come through in other chapters?

7. In the “Environment” [153] section, Renkl tackles pesticides, pollution, and climate change, filling the chapters with personal anecdotes. How does Renkl’s form of storytelling support her environmental activist writing?

8. Throughout *Graceland, At Last*, Renkl’s tone ranges from sorrowful to inspired to confrontational, showing the depth of emotion in these topics. Which tones and approaches stuck with you?

9. How do the varied subjects in *Graceland, At Last* give credibility to Renkl’s authority to write about the South every week for *The New York Times*? How does her work expand what journalism can accomplish?

10. *Graceland, At Last* covers roughly four years of weekly essays. Discuss the choice to separate the essays by topic rather than organizing them chronologically. What thematic threads can you find connecting the sections?

