

The Dark Flood Rises

By

Margaret Drabble

Comments by Molly W. Berger

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From D. H. Lawrence "The Ship of Death"

Piecemeal the body dies, and the timid soul
has her footing washed away, as the dark flood rises.

We are dying, we are dying, we are all of us dying
and nothing will stay the death-flood rising within us
and soon it will rise on the world, on the outside world.

We are dying, we are dying, piecemeal our bodies are dying
and our strength leaves us,
and our soul cowers naked in the dark rain over the flood,
cowering in the last branches of the tree of our life.

As Margaret Drabble begins her novel, *The Dark Flood Rises*, we are already ankle deep in the dark flood of death. Francesca Stubbs, the novel's heroine, a woman in her seventies, notes she is already too old to die young. The death of her acquaintance Stella Hartleap, a national celebrity who has died from smoke inhalation after setting her bed clothes on fire while both smoking and drinking, sets Fran on a poignant romp through a meditation on aging and death that chronicles more than thirty deaths and even more if you include the Moroccan immigrants who died at sea trying to reach the Canary Islands. Death for lack of a lever doorknob, death at the hands of a murderous husband, death through civil war, death from a botched gallbladder operation, death by arrhythmia, mesothelioma, pheochromocytoma,

death by glossy magazine, death from a broken heart – all these trigger thoughts both prosaic and profound about the unknowable nature of the end of life.

While explorations of death could, in less brilliant hands, lead a reader down a maudlin and depressing path, Drabble's irreverent humor and stream of consciousness narration keeps the reader buoyed and invested. The novel has no chapters. Transitions from one scene or character to another often seem whimsical and occasionally illogical, yet never jarring. The book is written in the manner that I suspect most of think. One idea triggers thoughts about something unrelated or beside the point. We find ourselves in the weeds of tangential memories or distracted by lists of errands and the circumstances that precipitated them. We worry about things beyond our control or drill down on irrelevant details. And, horrifyingly enough, when we do this aloud, only our closest friends and relatives tolerate this kind of babbling. Polite company nods and turns their attention elsewhere. Yet, in Drabble's hands, we are more than willing to entertain discussions of, for example, whether preservatives kill or preserve us, or whether there is value in studying the literature of dead wives' sisters.

The Dark Flood Rises is firmly grounded in a sense of place and what it means for the aging. Fran works for an agency that inspects care homes, including those still in the design process. Through Fran's work, we learn about considerations required for aging in place, such as the importance of the aforementioned doorknobs. Some of these new senior developments are built in flood zones and Fran inspects more than one during an unrelenting and dangerous rainy season; indeed, the dark flood rises quite literally. At Westmore Marsh, the residents are quite content to do crosswords, read newspapers, and play with their iPads, as they wait contentedly despite the deluge around them. Are they living or dying? Here, technological and

architectural innovations hold back the water, but not the inevitable denouement. Fran herself has moved to Tarrant Towers, a high rise apartment block, universally reviled by her friends and relatives. The apartment has a beautiful view of London, but lacks working elevators or any charm or even a decent postal code, and yet Fran, it seems, embraces it almost as penance to the lost happiness she suffered after the death of Hamish, her partner of twenty years. Or is it that she thinks that the discomforts will forestall life in a care home or even death as she trudges up the steps laden with groceries and packages? As she notes, “her own block, the block where she now lives, is brutal. But it isn’t hypocritical.”

Fran loves the Premier Inn, a chain of hotels that sounds much like American Marriotts or Hiltons. She loves their predictability, where she can count on a comfortable bed, the ability to watch the local news, and a breakfast egg prepared to her exacting tastes. But we also get to know Lanzarote and Fuerteventura in the Canary Islands and without having been there, we can tell you how much more appealing they are than Arrecife, which is overrun by tall dull hotels and sunburned tourists. We have a keen sense of what senior living is like in Cambridge’s Athene Grange, where Fran’s good friend Jo lives, where Owen England lives. In Fran’s view, Athene Grange is too manufactured, too cloying, too boring. And we have images of Claude’s flat and Teresa’s home and Bennett and Ivor’s serene house on a hill overlooking the sea. These are places where people have gone to live out the end of their lives. As Bennett says, “A man could die even here.”

Throughout the novel, Fran, and Drabble as the narrator, ponder the complexities that stalk their thinking about aging and death. Fran says, “Old age is a theme for heroism. It calls up upon courage.” She observes that she would like to witness the end of the world, just to see

how it happens. She views life as a journey, a pilgrimage. She wants to die in the light. Claude, on the other hand, sees the end with clarity and without a need to do more than listen to his beloved Maria Callas and be comforted by Persephone St. Just. Claude is certain that he is going to die with ease. "He will die here in bed, comfortably, relinquishing consciousness easily, when the time comes." Teresa, in the last gasp of her life, suffering from mesothelioma, accepts her coming death with grace, giving herself over to her strong faith. Even Fran's daughter Poppet, a young woman in her prime, is portrayed as having already died. "Poppet's life is in the past. This is why she seems so old, for she is living a lengthy and extended afterlife. The most important events of her life happened before she was twenty-three and she lives in their wake." Why did Sara die so young? How is it that Owen England outlives everyone? Bennett "apprehends caducity." He understands, recognizes, discerns, realizes, perceives the infirmity of old age and senility. So many people are dead, yet, inexplicably, Ishmael is alive.

Drabble imbues her novel so thoroughly with wry humor that even the more difficult moments are made lighter. Claude has resolved to drink expensive wine until he dies. Jo can't bear to talk to her financial advisor, Brian Fuller, and muses that "she would have paid a great deal of money never to have to see him again." And then she realizes that is exactly what she is doing. Fran can understand a twenty-three year old's impulse to kill off a lot of useless old people. Ivor wonders whether Bennett will live into his late eighties or nineties, which in "the mild climate of mummified and everlasting life he equally well may." A care giver's guide refers to the care-object as PIGLET, "the person I give love and endless therapy to." Potential names for care homes in adapted buildings are the "Old Gaol," or the "Olde Abattoir." Then, there is Bennett's friend who hikes up his trouser leg at dinner to empty his catheter into a plastic

bottle. Fran chips a tooth in Blackpool and feels quite comfortable because “being toothless is quite the fashion there.” Drabble’s humor carries us along, that is, until it doesn’t.

Drabble takes us into her confidence and writes, “It’s getting very near the end, but we are not yet at the end.” The moment of reckoning is when Jo, the woman of perfect health who “has met Old Age halfway and is determined to make friends with her”, the woman planning her next literature course, the woman who drinks absinthe with joy, dies suddenly in her bed. When Fran hears Jo’s son Nat’s voice on the phone, she knows. “What she feels is the thud of knowledge.” And the reader feels that thud as well. All the funny business in the prior three hundred pages has set us up for the harsh reality of death, of losing a best friend, of death’s unpredictability, of being blindsided by deep heart-wrenching loss. This death for Fran, like that of Hamish’s, is too serious for tears.

Throughout *The Dark Flood Rises*, we get to know Fran’s children, her ex-husband, her friends, her history, the stories of all the people who slip in and out of all these people’s lives. They are lives not terribly unlike our own, with work, relationship issues, family anxieties, preoccupation with food and drink, but hovering over all is the not knowing. Not knowing what illness might strike, what the cause might have been, what innocent encounter with toxins has caused our bodies to fail us. Why do some people like Sara die young and others, like Bennett, live long aware lives while still others, like Aunt Dorothy live on seemingly well but lost in the past. *The Dark Flood Rises* explores these questions with humor and grace but without answers. Drabble’s afterword lets us know how things turn out, but nonetheless, we still cannot understand the why of it all.

Discussion Questions

The Dark Flood Rises by Margaret. Drabble

- 1) Drabble teases us by letting us know that Fran Stubbs, Claude Stubbs, Bennett Carpenter, and Simon Aguilera are “all dead now.” Does it matter that we don’t know how or when? Why or why not?
- 2) Fran holds Jo’s death up as a model perfect death. How do the circumstances of Jo’s, Sara’s, Teresa’s and Aunt Dorothy’s deaths compare and how do their deaths affect the lives of their loved ones and how they think about death?
- 3) The novel is set in wet soggy England and the dry beautiful Canary Islands. How does Drabble employ these contrasting climates/locations to support her ruminations on life and death?
- 4) Drabble injects the novel with several tangential stories such as those about Ghalia Namarome, Ishmael, Jo’s students, Simon Aguilera, Jo’s Aunt Marian, Aunt Dorothy’s coloring in, Maria Callas, and even Ferdinand the Bull (among others). Do these tangents help or hinder the novel?
- 5) Several reviews accuse *The Dark Flood Rises* of not having a plot. What do you think?
- 6) At the very end of the novel, Fran reflects that “her life has been full of failure and defeat and triviality and small concerns, and at times she fears it is ending sadly. Her courage is running out, her energy is running out.” Is this a fair assessment or is Fran being too hard on herself? If so, what were her expectations for a life well-lived?