



The Dark Flood Rises

Margaret Drabble

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One of the *Washington Post's* 50 Notable Works of Fiction in 2017 and a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2017

From the great British novelist Dame Margaret Drabble comes a vital and audacious tale about the many ways in which we confront aging and living in a time of geopolitical rupture.

Francesca Stubbs has an extremely full life. A highly regarded expert on housing for the elderly who is herself getting on in age, she drives “restlessly round England,” which is “her last love . . . She wants to see it all before she dies.” Amid the professional conferences that dominate her schedule, she fits in visits to old friends, brings home cooked dinners to her ailing ex-husband, texts her son, who is grieving over the shocking death of his girlfriend, and drops in on her daughter, a quirky young woman who lives in a flood plain in the West Country. Fran cannot help but think of her mortality, but she is “not ready to settle yet, with a cat upon her knee.” She still prizes her “frisson of autonomy,” her belief in herself as a dynamic individual doing meaningful work in the world.

The Dark Flood Rises moves between Fran’s interconnected group of family and friends in England and a seemingly idyllic expat community in the Canary Islands. In both places, disaster looms. In Britain, the flood tides are rising, and in the Canaries, there is always the potential for a seismic event. As well, migrants are fleeing an increasingly war-torn Middle East.

Though *The Dark Flood Rises* delivers the pleasures of a traditional novel, it is clearly situated in the precarious present. Margaret Drabble’s latest enthralls, entertains, and asks existential questions in equal measure. Alas, there is undeniable truth in Fran’s insight: “Old age, it’s a fucking disaster!”

The Dark Flood Rises Details

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From Reader Review The Dark Flood Rises for online ebook

Anni says

The title refers to encroaching old age and death but could also be seen as a more ominous warning about the ending of western civilisation - or am I reading too much into it? In any case, it is not a depressing read and Drabble writes like a dream. For a much more in-depth review and analysis, I refer you to my good friends of this parish: Fionnuala and Paromjit.

Anna says

Margaret Drabble's novels need to be savored. Not swallowed and devoured, or rushed through in search for action and new events. Here, time flows in a different pace. They 'taste' best, when sentences are carefully considered, chewed slowly, to extract all the juices, aromas and flavours. She paints her pictures thoughtfully, her characters don't rush, and the story instead of rushing forward, meanders slowly through places, characters and time.

I used to love those novels, many years ago, for their almost meditative quality. I read a few of them and then, for some reason just stopped, don't really know why. Perhaps it was my life, that started rushing and I just couldn't adjust the speed? But now I am enchanted anew, although this story is different. Margaret Drabble is now well in her seventies and so are her characters. And the story is about aging, and about people who have aged. Yet there is nothing dark, depressive, desperate or hopeless about it. It is just about the last phase of life.

The first quote that has arrested me was:

'A life has a destination, an ending (..) but now, in the twenty-first century, we seem to be inventing innumerable ways of postponing the sense of arrival, the sense of arriving at a proper ending. (...) And the result, in so many cases, has been that we arrive there not in good spirits, as we say our last farewells and greet the afterlife, but senseless, incontinent, demented, medicated into amnesia, aphasia, indignity.'

And that's what it is all about. About proper ending. About giving dignity and appreciation to the last stage of life. Because life doesn't end when we retire or when we lose our full capacity. It goes on until the end and in order to give the life story a proper appreciation, to arrive at the end in good spirits it is important to keep living.

So, that's what they all do. There is Fran, who is driven, active, busy living her life, working for improvement of the conditions for the elderly. 'The Vikings hadn't approved of dying quietly and comfortably in bed.' she says.

There is her ex-husband, Claude, former surgeon, 'currently making himself as comfortable as possible.' committed to his apartment, but well looked after and apparently not missing anything.

Then there is Bennett and his much younger partner Ivor, who live in their beautiful, exceptional house on Fuerteventura. 'A man could die even here.' says Bennett

And Josephine, Fran's friend, teaches an adult education literature classes but decided to meet the old age half way, and moved into - into kind of a 'student campus for the elderly' in Cambridge.

They all consider the end, they make themselves comfortable, but for that, they do not stop living. I am

grateful to Margaret Drabble for this vision and for the glimpse of a world where I have not yet been but where I can not avoid being sooner or later. I am grateful for a vision of arriving in good spirits, as we say our last farewells and greet the afterlife.

Elaine says

Long overdue for a review on this. Will be brief rather than let it go unreviewed. Margaret Drabble is the best. Wait, was that not enough? Ok, this meditation on aging and mortality (our own, our climate's, our mores', those of yesteryear) is exquisitely written and bitingly heartwrenchingly perceptive. This book spoke to me, on the cusp of 50, with the same immediacy and power as did Drabble's Gates of Ivory trilogy when she, and I, were both a few decades younger. Be forewarned- this book has literally no plot. It is about character, and feeling, and setting, and rumination. But see if you are not dying to visit the Canary Islands when you finish - I'll meet you there.

Rebecca Foster says

(3.5) The “dark flood” is D.H. Lawrence’s metaphor for death, and here it corresponds to busy seventy-something Fran’s obsession with last words, obituaries and the search for the good death as many of her friends and acquaintances succumb – but also to literal flooding in the west of England and (dubious, this) to mass immigration of Asians and Africans into Europe. This is my favorite of the five Drabble books that I’ve read – it’s closest in style and tone to her sister A.S. Byatt as well as to Tessa Hadley, and the themes of old age and life’s randomness are strong – even though there seem to be too many characters and the Canary Islands subplot mostly feels like an unnecessary distraction.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Why I did not finish: I only gave it 50 pages but those 50 were a struggle. There are no chapters so I felt trapped by the narrator, picture Maggie Smith looking at you sternly every time you try to leave. I tried to be polite and to stay but I slipped under the table and ran out the back door.

The narrator, Fran, is an older woman with a cold inner dialogue. I didn't enjoy her perspective and felt judged, as did everyone else in her life, I imagine. While her character is not one more of the dottering old people so popular in literature these days (to my great chagrin), I still felt the author was using a character like this either to say what *she* wanted to about society without having any consequences, or to simply have a character who does so without the typical social consequences. What consequences could there be, for she is old and nobody expects her to change. Etc.

I wonder if all of this author's books would feel this way to me or if this is a unique experience. Would you recommend any others?

(And dear Thomas-from-the-Readers, sorry... I tried this because I had you on my podcast and you had it to talk about and we veered off into talking about the author herself and never came back. I was planning to redeem that with a shimmering review but whoops. I know you like/love this author, and am happy to say

this might be another reader's positive reading experience, but it was not for me.)

Gill says

'The Dark Flood Rises' by Margaret Drabble

4 stars/ 8 out of 10

Margaret Drabble's novels formed the backdrop to my teen and university years, then to my adult family life, and, in her latest novel 'The Dark Flood Rises', she approaches issues relating to ageing.

The book consists of the interlocking histories of several characters (many of whom are elderly) and some of their friends and relatives. As the book progresses, Drabble subtly reveals more and more information about each character.

Fortuitously, several of the locations where this novel takes place are ones that I know. This added an additional layer of interest for me. There were a lot of current and 'historical' references and comments that I enjoyed, though I wonder whether younger readers may find them less pertinent.

One of the aspects of Drabble's writing style in this book, is the use of the omniscient narrator. This is not very fashionable nowadays, but it is put to good use by her and adds greatly to the story.

There were times whilst reading this that I laughed out loud; there were also many poignant and thought provoking moments. It was definitely a 'Good Read'.

Thank you to Canongate Books and to NetGalley for an ARC.

Ron Charles says

Margaret Drabble has written a novel about aging and death, which for American readers should make it as popular as a colostomy bag. That's a pity because Drabble, 77, is as clear-eyed and witty a guide to the undiscovered country as you'll find.

The ominous title of her new book, "The Dark Flood Rises," comes from a poem by D.H. Lawrence that you mustn't post on the community bulletin board at Grandma's retirement home. Among its menacing stanzas is this bit of advice:

Have you built your ship of death, O have you?

O build your ship of death, for you will need it.

Drabble's feisty heroine, Francesca Stubbs, knows that ship is on its way, but she has no intention of waiting at the pier for its arrival. And don't think "heroine" is too lofty a honorific for Fran. "Old age itself is a theme for heroism," she insists. "It calls upon courage." Newly single — again — and in her 70s, Fran has

developed a survival plan that depends on. . . .

To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...>

Paromjit says

This is a novel that is a meditation and rumination on death and dying. However, this is not dark nor depressing. In true Drabble style, it has a low key, clinical and dispassionate feel with a gentle wit. This is not a book driven by action or plot, it feels more like a meander through the lives of a family and friends. Francesca Stubbs is in her seventies, and working for an elder care charity. She is enjoying her conference in the Midlands on the elderly and the issues that surround them. She has the chance to meet colleagues and listen to talks on the latest gadgets aimed to improve life for the old. Despite having a brief and fractious marriage with Claude, she now finds herself having come full circle, having become his carer and in charge of his meals, over which a lot of time is expended. She has two children, Christopher and Poppet. Christopher is coming to terms with a death by going to the Canaries and finding solace in the company of a gay couple, Bennett and Ivor.

The narrative switches from person to person, we learn their thoughts and lives. Each character in turn analyses the others, with a lack of sentimentality. Death and dying touches all of them. Poppet is in the west country facing rising waters. Conditions facing the elderly are explored such as dementia and strokes. The important function of memory is a key issue. The dark flood is reference to what could a number of scenarios in the novel. The influx of immigrants into the Canaries. The rising tide claiming the dead, and returning for the dying. Rising waters in the west country. Where the novel really excels is in the characterisation and insights into their lives, the everyday, history, relationships, politics etc. The process of reflection on life and death has a redemptive quality. At one point, Fran refers to ageing as a fascinating journey into the unknown, which might well be the way some see it. This is a book that I feel I need to spend time thinking over. A highly recommended read. Thanks to Canongate for an ARC.

Hugh says

This is a complex tapestry that combines a thoughtful meditation on ageing, coping strategies and the effects of our ageing population on society with a family story and various floods both literal and metaphorical. There are no chapters or sections, but the focus shifts between the various protagonists in a way that is cleverly plotted and makes many intriguing connections, perhaps with slightly too many convenient coincidences.

At the start of the book we meet Fran, twice married and recently widowed, whose work takes her round the country inspecting care home developments and attending conferences. She cares for her largely bedridden ex-husband Claude, and the plot also revolves around their two children and her two contemporary female friends.

Fran's daughter lives in the flood-hit Somerset levels, and a large part of the story is set in Lanzarote, which conveniently allows Drabble to talk about two other kinds of flooding - the tide of immigration from west

Africa to Europe and the threat of a volcanic eruption in the Canaries that is believed to be capable of creating a cataclysmic tsunami. There are also subplots on art and the Spanish Civil War and the nature of academic research.

The whole is reflective, moving, easy to read and very satisfying, if a little gloomy. Drabble is clearly still in fine form in her late 70s.

Fionnuala says

When we first meet Fran, the main character of this book, she's pondering her life-long fascination with famous people's last words, though interestingly enough, she suspects her own last words will be quite banal, some version of 'You fucking idiot!' as her car hits a tree.

Unlikely as it may seem, Fran, at seventy-something, *already too old to die young*, is still careering madly up and down the motorways of Britain in her role as an inspector of housing schemes for the elderly, and as she switches lanes to overtake a large truck, while continuing to reminisce about 'dying sayings', the reader wonders if indeed she mightn't meet her death at the wheel of her car.

Coincidentally, one of the poems Margaret Drabble has chosen as an epigraph to Fran's story is 'The Wheel' by WB Yeats. Yeats' wheel is not a steering wheel of course, but a metaphorical wheel, steering, as it were, the ship of life towards death:

*Through winter-time we call on spring,
And through the spring on summer call,
And when abounding hedges ring
Declare that winter's best of all;
And after that there's nothing good
Because the spring-time has not come
—Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb.*

The other epigraph Drabble has chosen is two lines from 'The Ship of Death' by DH Lawrence:

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

I hadn't heard of Lawrence's poem so I looked it up and discovered some fine images that helped me understand Drabble's themes better. This one for instance is particularly relevant:

*Oh build your ship of death, your little ark
and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine
for the dark flight down oblivion.*

Fran, whether she's examining the suitability of facilities for the elderly, or taking meals to bedridden friends and relatives, is always deeply preoccupied with the building and the provisioning of 'arks for everyone'. The irony of the situation is that Fran hasn't made provision for herself - she hasn't built her own ark. In creating

the character of Fran, Margaret Drabble has combined the desire to face up to approaching death with the refusal to do the same, and she's done it with a surprisingly light touch.

Yes, this book manages to be entertaining in spite of the main theme - and in spite of a certain rambling quality as the author moves between Fran's memories and the memories of a host of other characters, some of whom live far from the motorway inns of Britain in which Fran spends a lot of time sipping cheap wine and reminiscing about her life.

One of the sub stories takes place on the Canarian island of Lanzarote, that paradise where many Britons have built their own 'arks'. At first, when we find ourselves suddenly transported from bleak Britain to sunny Lanzarote, and with so many new characters to deal with, we wonder if perhaps we've skipped a chapter, the one where those characters might have been previously mentioned. Then we begin to suspect that this slightly muddled narrative - along with a certain amount of repetition - might have been an intentional strategy on Margaret Drabble's part, an attempt to make us understand what it is like to be seventy-six, the age at which she wrote this novel. If so, it worked. Having said that, I'd like to also emphasise how well Drabble eventually works the large cast of characters into a coherent whole - everything links back perfectly to Fran in the end.

Many of the links are made through art and literature so the book offers an extra layer of pleasure to those who appreciate such references. I particularly enjoyed the fact that one of the two characters who happened to be reading José Saramago's *The Stone Raft*, was reading it in Lanzarote - itself a kind of stone raft that has drifted away from Africa.

In fact I enjoyed all the very many literary references, and while those references linked the various sections nicely, it was probably the art references that provided the main framework of links between the separate groups of characters. One character will be looking at a painting by a particular artist, for example, and then another character in a different section will mention the same artist, or find a photo in a book of the painting referred to earlier. And behind those surface serendipities, strong real-life connections emerge little by little. As I read, I began to look up some of the artists mentioned - Stanley Spencer, Pauline Boty, and particularly Giorgio de Chirico because one of the minor characters owns a painting by de Chirico that sounds a lot like this one, now in a private collection coincidentally:

The painting portrays a pale golden sandy beach with two horses, rose and gold and grey and muscular horses, arrested in movement, their nostrils flared, their thick curled carved heroic manes as solid as stone. Behind them, the orderly white ruins of a classical temple and at their feet a broken fluted column...

The same character also owns a work by Canarian-born artist, Manolo Millares, *a collage made of burlap and sackcloth and twine and tar, with stains as of rust or old blood...it's one of what he called his 'arpilleras', his cloths of memory.*

Margaret Drabble's novel is like a collage made up of scraps of lives containing their quota of rust and old blood - and around them all is wrapped Fran's personal 'arpilleras', her own very distinctive cloths of memory.

LeAnne says

By God, this lady is GOOD! Tag me as a middle aged fan girl of this wry, clever, and hugely talented 77 year old writer! I've got to get my hands on her other works.

The Dark Flood ripples around a central character named Fran, a woman who travels around the country (England) inspecting, appraising, and innovating on care homes for the aging. She is the oldest of her colleagues, but has more energy than most of them and is a well respected speaker at the various conferences she attends. In her travels, Fran is a little bit like that kid in the movie *The Sixth Sense*. She sees old people.

The dark flood, of course, is the approach of death. Oddly enough, this story is not a dark one at all. We meet incredibly interesting people with great stories to tell, and not all of them are elderly. Beyond the people that she intersects with through work, we meet her two best friends, her ex-husband upon whom she dotes, her adult children, and various mutual friends living in the Canary Islands.

There is a dark flood alluded to in the islands, and those are the refugees from the African continent. We also get a taste of life in the westerly marshes of England where the term flood is not metaphorical but real. Volcanic magma, ever causing shifts in the geologic plates below us, oozes its way into the story in a slow, imperceptible way as well.

This novel is a linkage of life stories from people who love one another. If we were to write about your life, it might be important for us to meet the love of your life or your child or your old college roommate with whom you have lost touch but now have recently found. Who is it that is important to you? When that flood reaches your door who is it that you will most remember?

Outstanding.

Paul Fulcher says

"Untimely death is intermittently on Fran's mind, alongside housing for the refusing-to-die elderly and her more-or-less bedridden ex-husband's dinners."

Margaret Drabble's new novel, her 20th, takes as its subject, ageing, particularly the practicalities of old-age living, and death, with Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse* (The Coming of Age) a key touch point.

The main character, Francesca Stubbs, works for a housing charity, and drives herself (at times a tad recklessly) around the country visiting and writing reports on sheltered housing developments, and, despite her highly cultured background, most enjoying drinking cheap wine in Premier Inns while watching regional TV.

The novel's opening, setting up Fran's character, provides a good taster for the mixture of dry humour, pathos and erudition that characterises the novel:

She has often suspected that her last words to herself and in this world will prove to be "You bloody old fool" or, perhaps, depending on the mood of the day or the time of the night, 'you fucking idiot'. As the speeding car hits the tree, or the unserviced boiler explodes, or the smoke and flames fill the hallway, or the grip on the high guttering gives way, those will be her last words. She isn't to know for sure that it will be so, but she suspects it. In her latter years, she's become deeply interested in the phrase 'Call no man happy until he is dead'. Or no woman, come to that. 'Call no woman happy until she is dead.' Fair enough, and the ancient

world had known woman as well as men who had met unfortunate ends: Clytemnestra, Dido, Hecuba, Antigone. Though of course Antigone, one must remember, had rejoiced to die young, and in a good (if to us pointless) cause, thereby avoiding all the inconveniences of old age.

Fran herself is already too old to die young, and too old to avoid bunions and arthritis, moles and blebs, weakening wrists, incipient but not yet treatable cataracts and encroaching weariness. She can see that in time (and perhaps not in a very long time) all these annoyances will become so annoying that she will be willing to embark on one of those acts of reckless folly that will bring the whole thing to a rapid, perhaps a sensational ending. But would the rapid ending cancel out and negate the intermittent happiness of the earlier years, the long struggle to some kind of maturity, the modest successes, the hard work? What would the balance sheet look like, at the last reckoning?

It was the obituaries of Stella Hartleap that set her thoughts in this actuarial direction, as she drove along the M1 toward Birmingham, at only three or four miles above the speed limit.

The print obituaries had been annoying, piously annoying in a sexist, ageist, hypocritical, mealy-mouthed manner, reeking of Schadenfreude [...] So Stella had died of smoke inhalation, having set her bedclothes on fire while smoking in bed on her remote farmstead in the Black Mountains, and having just polished off a tumbler of Famous Grouse. So what? A better exit than dying in a hospital corridor in a wheelchair while waiting for another dose of poisonous chemotherapy, which had recently been her good friend Birgit's dismal fate. At least Stella had nobody to blame but herself, and although the last minutes couldn't have been pleasant, neither had Birgit's. Not at all pleasant, by all accounts, and without any complimentary frisson of autonomy.

Although Fran is at the novel's centre, Drabble introduces us to a range of memorably drawn characters. Drabble's third person narrator flits in and out of their minds, and rather oddly with varying degrees of omniscience, so that while seeing things entirely from a certain character's perspective we are suddenly told we can probe no further in one particular topic ("We don't know what happened to Poppet in that most important and disastrous relationship. Maybe one day she will tell us.", "We don't want to be privy to Ivor's thoughts about this omen."). Perhaps this is Drabble's way to modernise what is otherwise a rather dated approach to narration - the selectively-omniscient narrator.

These characters also have the disadvantage of all rather sounding alike in the tone if not the content of their thoughts, so that one sees Drabble speaking through each of them. In part this reflects that they are all drawn from a rather narrow social set of affluent upper-middle class and mostly students of the humanities. [At one point Fran's husband reflects on his relief that his children had proper occupations, an environmental activist and a TV producer of art programs, and hadn't become bankers, politician, cosmetic surgeons, property developers or comedians, causing me to reflect that I would wish exactly the opposite for my own.]

There is an even wider, and at times slightly bewildering, cast of background characters and artistic references where Drabble freely mixes the real-world (e.g. the great José Saramago who ended his days on Lanzarote), the fictional (both an activist for the Western Sahara independence movement and the novelist Alice Studdert Meades, studied by one of Fran's friends as a leading exponent in the genre of Deceased Wife's Sister novels, are drawn in such detail I initially assumed they must really exist) and characters from her own past novels (Maroussia Darling from her last novel *The Pure Gold Baby* makes another cameo appearance). I found myself googling many a reference - often simply to find out whether an artist or historical figure was a product of Drabble's erudition or of her imagination, both of which are prodigious.

Interesting also to see a reference to Pauline Boty, who plays a key role in Ali Smith's *Autumn*, and indeed

thoughts of Autumn link in with the novel's title taken from a line in DH Lawrence's poem The Ship of Death, which starts "Now it is autumn and the falling fruit and the long journey towards oblivion."

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

In Drabble's novel she extends the range of her concerns to include more apocalyptic Dark Floods, including the flood of refugees from North Africa, at that time, seeking land in Lanzarote where much of the novel is set, global warming and the floods in rural England, and also the mega-tsunami that might, indeed will, one day be caused by the eruption of Cumbre Vieja in the Canary Island (albeit scientists have more recently debunked that theory).

But Drabble's main focus is on longevity and ageing as a problem for society. As an actuary myself I was pleased to see actuarial references:

"Fran found this statistic, true or false, intimidating. Longevity has fucked-up out pensions, our work-life balance, out health service, our housing, our happiness. It's fucked-up old age itself.

...

The shape of the bell curve is a disaster. It's a dystopian science fiction scenario, a disaster movie."

However, a by-product of Drabble's focus on one particular social set is that her desire to speak to the difficulties of old-age living is focused on a rather narrow, and actually extremely advantaged, cohort. There is very little in this novel for those whose meagre pensions have been exhausted, who cannot afford expensive care homes and companions, and who rely on State provision.

Overall, very far from a page turner, but a thought-provoking novel, both on the topic matter itself and via the wide range of cultural references.

Phrynne says

It has been years since I read a book by Margaret Drabble and I am not sure why I stopped because she writes so beautifully. The Dark Flood Rises is a book about death and dying which seems a little macabre but in the hands of this author it becomes mostly just a gentle trip down memory lane.

Drabble is a very well educated woman and her literary knowledge is everywhere in this story and I like that! I usually find my vocabulary holds up to most books but I had to look up a couple of words in this one and I intend to seek out some of the poems she quotes as well. She also has a lovely dry wit which helps transcend the rather dark topic of death.

This is not an exciting book rather it is a discussion about the normal patterns of life and death. Very, very readable and I enjoyed it very much.

Hanneke says

How could I have forgotten Margaret Drabble? I have not read her for a long time, which is remarkable because she was one of my favorite authors decades ago. I used to read all her novels immediately upon publication and the older ones collected in a great pile. I now read her last one, The Dark Flood Rises,

because I saw it beckoning me and thought I should read her again. I was not prepared for the fact that the novel would shake me to the core, but then I remembered she did that quite a lot with her previous novels. Although it is about old age, illness and death, it is not morose. It just relayed to me how Drabble feels now she is getting older. The novel portrays a group of families and friends who all deal with old age in quite different ways. The novel is comforting and sad in various degrees. Excellently written, erudite, moving and funny. I loved it, although it made me gloomy now and then which, I am sure, was not Drabble's intention.

Heidi The Hippie Reader says

Half a dozen characters live lives focused on death, aging or managing the same. *The Dark Flood Rises* is an unflinching examination of end-of-life issues.

This book has very little action but plenty of details for book clubs to unpack, if you can get through it. I was only one of three, in a club of a dozen or so members, who managed to finish the read.

Readers may only want to tackle this one if they have plenty of patience and interest in complex allusions to art, history and literature.

The leader of my group, who likes to research every little thing related to the book club picks, found much to enjoy in *The Dark Flood Rises*. I, like the majority, didn't really care for it.

It's funny, book club leaders picked this read because they thought it had something to do with an actual flood.

The title is actually a poetic way to describe death. Don't be fooled :) like we were.
