Two Chairs In Print

Issue 17
Voyage to a Rocky Shore



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Colophon

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Acknowledgement of Country

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Transcript of Episode 17, Season 2

Introduction

David:

Hello and welcome to episode 17 of the second season of our podcast, Two Chairs Talking. My name is David Grigg, and I'm here today with my good friend Perry Middlemiss. What's been happening with you, Perry?

Perry:

It's very quiet at the moment, David, which is actually quite good. I've been away for a few weekends. Out of the city, out doing things, and it's just sometimes good to get back in and not do a lot, watch a few films, read a few books, think about stuff, and try and get some sleep.

David:

Ah, yes, that's a good thing.

Perry:

Yeah, I always feel better if I have a lot of sleep. There are times when probably a bit like you, David, as we get older, the sleeping patterns go a little bit crazy and every now and again, you'll get a period where I'm wide awake at 2 o'clock in the morning wondering what the hell I'm going to be doing. So I get up and do something for an hour, an hour and a half, and then go back to bed and I sleep alright. But then it just throws everything out. And then you feel like you need to sleep in the afternoon. And you can't sleep in the evening. Anyway, so just lately it seems to be not too bad for which I am incredibly grateful.

David:

Yes, indeed.

Perry:

So I wake up feeling, well, I don't bound out of bed anymore, not like I was, you know, in my twenties and thirties. But at least I feel as though I'm mostly alive when I wake up, which is a good thing. Well, at least I wake up.

David:

That's a very good thing.

Perry:

As they say, you wouldn't be dead for quids.

David:

No, indeed.

Perry:

Because if you're dead, we wouldn't be able to talk about films and books, which we're going to talk about today.

David:

Exactly, exactly. Alright, do you want to get straight into it then? We're not going to talk about the weather, we're not going to talk about sport, we've been talking about sleep. There we are, that's fine.

Perry:

No politics, no sport, no weather. Sleep's now out. We've spoken about that. We're rapidly running out of topics of conversation for chat.

David:

Conversational topics.

Perry:

Yes, well, maybe we should just dive straight in and forget all about it, David. Yeah, let's do that.

Discussion

Project Hail Mary, directed by Philip Lord and Christopher Miller

David:

Let's just start. Now I believe you've seen a film. Tell me about the film.



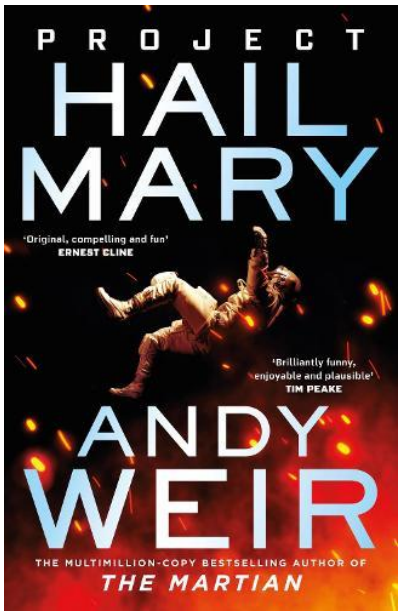
Perry:

Right, okay. Well the major film that we're going to be talking about today is *Project Hail Mary*, directed by Philip Lord and Christopher Miller. This is currently doing the rounds in the cinemas and it's all over. It's everywhere. Probably the first big film of this year, I would think. And I think it's going to be one of those films that just about everybody is going to go along and see for various reasons. But anyway, we'll get into that.

This film is based on the novel of the same name by Andy Weir, published in 2021. Weir, you might remember, was the author of *The Martian*, a 2011 novel that was adapted into a film directed by Ridley Scott and featuring Matt Damon in the lead role. That film sold massive numbers of tickets, over about \$600 million US dollars worth, and was very popular indeed. I greatly enjoyed it and was looking forward to this one. In fact, I had a bit of a quick look at the box office for *Project Hail Mary*, and it has gone past 600 million US as well. So moving, heading along towards that billion dollar mark, which is a big number in anybody's language, I reckon.

I read the *Project Hail Mary* novel back in May 22 and enjoyed it well enough. I gave it the 3.8 out of 5 on my points rating scale, and was pleased to read a few years back that this was also to be adapted into a film. I suppose that was only to be expected given the way the previous Weir adaptation had fared at the office, and it had been some time since a non-franchise SF film had done that well. By non-franchise here, I mean, you know, not Marvel, DC Universe, Star Wars, Star Trek, Alien, Predator, any of the others, right? So this is just one complete standalone.

Okay, so much for the background of Weir and the novel and all the rest of it. What about the film itself? So the film starts with a man, Ryan Gosling, as we find out, long-haired and bearded, waking up in what looks like a high tech sleeping bag. An artificial voice announces that eye-movement is detected. A tube is drawn out of the man's throat and the voice asks, "What is two plus two?" There



is what appears to be a moving mechanical arm hovering over the man doing things. That was the one that pulled out the tube out of his throat. And the man fails to answer. He sort of makes some muttering noises, clacks his teeth, and nothing happens and this becomes rather intriguing. And then he falls off whatever it is he was lying on, and we're away.

We certainly know that this man is on a spaceship somewhere out in space and that he's been in a very long medically induced coma, but he has no recollection of who he is or why he's there. Without giving away any spoilers, it would take him the entire film to get the full picture of just how he came to be where he is, though he does soon discover that his name is Dr. Rylan Grace, and it is on a spaceship en route to another star system. This actually is the Tau Ceti system, nearly 12 light years away from Earth. He also discovers that he's now alone on the ship as his two companion crew members have died during the journey. As he slowly explores the spaceship, he also begins to remember that back on Earth he was a schoolteacher and that he was recruited by a woman by the name of Eva Stratt, she's played by German actor Sandra Huller. And he's recruited to help investigate an alien organism that's been discovered called an astrophage, which is slowly eating our sun. Grace doesn't really know very much about this, but he's sworn into the secrecy about the project, which is called Project Hail Mary, of the title, and he is told that a number of other suns in our galactic vicinity have also been infected by this organism. All but one, Tau Ceti. Why is that? he asks, to which he receives a chorus of "we don't know" from the project scientists. Grace has been recruited because in his previous job as a molecular biologist he once wrote a scientific paper postulating that water was not a necessary requirement for life. Given the fact that this astrophage is surviving in the sun's outer atmospheric layer, the corona, the project team thinks that the organism may not be water-based. It seems like a reasonable assumption. Hence their approach to Grace, because he's a molecular biologist, and he's made this outlandish claim in the past. Grace also learns that the project is aiming to build an interstellar spaceship to travel to Tau Ceti to see if they can determine why it, among all the other stars, remains unaffected.

The film storyline proceeds in two major time lines basically: the present time aboard the spaceship and the flashbacks that Grace experiences, where we're told the backstory behind the mission. So you get these two things bouncing backwards and forwards. Back on the spaceship, Grace has consigned his dead colleagues to space, has practiced flying the craft, and has now arrived in the Tau Ceti solar system. There he finds that just as back home there is an infrared line of astrophages connecting the Sun's system with the planet. Back home this connection runs from the Sun through to the planet Venus. Grace, back on Earth, discovered that the astrophage was using Venus's carbon dioxide atmosphere to breed and then traveling back to the Sun to feed. The same process is happening to Tau Ceti, and yet the sun there seems largely unaffected by the process. While Grace is pondering this his ship tells him that something is approaching, and when it arrives, Grace realizes that this is another spacecraft, definitively non-human. Again, it is not a spoiler to state that Grace meets an alien aboard that



craft and begins to work with it to solve the problem of why Tau Cedi is not being impacted in the same way as our son and the new alien sun for Eridani.

All this stuff about the alien is revealed in the trailers for the film, which is quite an interesting thing that they did, seems to have been that they've almost given away some of the major items of the film, but there must be a good reason for it. Anyway, what we're presented here with this particular film is a genuinely intriguing first contact story with an intelligent alien species that is very, very different from our own. Details and images of this alien have been in the film's many trailers, so it's okay for me to state this creature is a five-limbed, small and rocky in appearance. Grace dubs it Rocky of course, because he has got to give it a name because the alien's name, when it he states it, it's just, it's hugely long and fairly musical, and Grace has got no chance of being able to say it, so he just calls him Rocky for short. This alien is also a great engineer who lives in an atmosphere that Grace would find hot and poisonous, so the two of them can't interact completely together. They have to be in their own barriers. The alien spends most of its time in a small clear capsule that it has built. And if Grace wants to go over anywhere close over to the ship, the alien ship, as he does first off, he's got to be in a spacesuit with his own oxygen supply. Grace soon finds out that Rocky's in a very much similar situation to his own, in that while he looks completely different, and while their spaceship looks completely different, Rocky also is alone on his ship, and that all of his companions have died on the voyage as well. And Rocky doesn't know why this has happened. And that will be a clue later on to something that happens in the film near the end. The two realize that the only way they're going to be able to determine what's going on is that they have to work together. So it's a first contact story, a buddy movie, but above all else, it's a story about two very unlikely companions working together to solve a problem that could destroy both of their worlds.

And let me say this is a very different approach, story approach, from most SF films involving alien species that we've seen over the last 20 or 30 years. Generally, they tend towards the main plot device of the alien trying to kill the human for one reason or another, or the humans trying to kill the aliens for one reason or another, and it's really refreshing to see something different for a change. Two completely different alien species. I mean, completely different. This isn't Star Trek where everybody's walking around in the same environment, breathing the same air, all looking pretty much humanoid. Rocky is probably less than a metre high, and he looks like a Rocky beach ball with five legs. He does not look humanoid at all. And I was very grateful for that as well. I thought, you know, finally they're getting to the point where they're making aliens that aren't like us.

This film, getting back to it, is very well made, this film. The spaceships sets all look authentic and lived in, especially after Grace has been roaming around for a while. And the depictions of the planet that Grace's ship orbits in the Tau City system are basically pretty spectacular. All in all, this is a high commercial, intriguing, and suspenseful science fiction film that should appeal to even the harshest SF critics, I think. Yes, it also features overt sentimentality, corniness and pathos; though I think their levels are acceptable in this scenario. It's an American film after all, and if you don't have that sentimentality into it, they're just going to get lost, they won't know what they're doing.

Special mention I think should be made before I finish up about the work of Ryan Gosling in the lead role here. He carries the film for the majority of its running time, being mostly on his own or with his alien puppet friend because of course the way the film's made and for the alien to be able to move around it had to be puppeteers that were doing it. And it's rather hard to see any other actor that I can think of being able to fit this part. And that's really all you need to say about the casting. If they pick the right guy or the right person for the right role you think that the rest of it's going to fall into place. And I think it probably does.

Now, it was said of *The Martian* when it came out that iif you came out of that film not liking it, then you really need to consider why you go to movies at all. I think something similar could be said about this offering, David. What do you think of it?

David:

You're setting me up here, Perry.

Perry:

Oh yeah, why not?

David:

Because I didn't like it much.

Perry:

Ah yes, well I can't work out why you don't, so you've got to tell me now.

David:

Well, you see, it starts with the fact that I didn't much like the book. I was quite annoyed by the book. And so all my annoyances of the book came over to the film, and in fact it perhaps emphasized in the film. So why didn't I like the book? I think the problem is that I just don't find Ryland Grace to be, he's not even an appealing character, he's not like a character at all, he's just a hollow man. You've got no sense really of where he's coming from, why he has no relationships with

anybody of any import. And the same is true in the film. If you hadn't read the book you sort of think maybe he's going to have some sort of romantic relationship with this woman who's kind of organizing things. But I think later on in the film you get the impression that Grace is actually gay. But nevertheless there's no other relationships that you sort of see him having in the film. It's the same with the book. He's just like an individual by himself. And so, without being able to invest yourself into his character, I just felt that the book was, you know, I'd say, hollow. So he's like a nobody. There's no sense of depth to him. I mean Rockey the Alien actually seems to have more depth than Ryland Grace does. And the relationship with Rocky is the only real relationship that you ever see Grace having.

So, I mean it looks pretty, it's beautifully made, and some nice special effects. I did get a bit annoyed at the part where they're having to dive into the atmosphere of this planet at one point and there are bits being ripped off Grace's spaceship all over the place and you think, "surely some of those bits are actually important to the operation of the spaceship, and that if the bits come off them, may have actually an impact on the survivability", but no, that doesn't happen.

The other thing I would say is that the book spends too long going into all the scientific aspects. Firstly, I find the scientific aspects mostly unbelievable. This astrophage, which is converting energy directly into matter, and is also able to then reverse that and change matter directly into energy, you know, equals mc squared. I find that very, very hard to swallow. But there's a lot in the book. There's quite some tedious bits in the book where he's telling you about all this. Whereas in the film, I think it was the other way around, that you didn't get enough to really get a sense of what's going on. It goes by too quickly to get a real sense of what is it that's actually happening to the sun. Because I don't think the bugs are actually eating the sun. They're just absorbing a proportion of its energy. I think it was gonna drop the earth's the solar radiation on the Earth by about 10% or something like that. But that's enough to put the Earth into a deep freeze. And so there's that. Yeah, and so you sort of skip by all that in the film. It whizzes by very quickly, and you've got no chance of sort of grasping what's actually going on. There were bits in the film I just find were tedious. I'm sitting there sort of twiddling my thumbs thinking, get on with it, you know. So, I know I'm the one person in the entire known universe who didn't like the book. I know I'm the only person in the entire known universe who didn't like the film, but I didn't like the film. There you go.

Perry:

Okay, look, I'll take your point about the hollowness of the of the character. He's a major plot device to basically get things moving. And you know, you can say, well, it's manipulative that both Grace and Rocky end up in pretty much the same situation on a spaceship on their own with all these…

David:

And what are the odds? You know, two spacecraft arrive almost at the same place at almost the same time, and both of them have lost all their crew, except one person, for unknown reasons.

Perry:

Oh no, no, no, no, you forget though that Rocky's actually been in that system for some time. He's been there for a while.



David:

Yeah, yeah, but okay, even if it's been if it's been there for 500 years, in the cosmic scheme of things these two things are an incredible coincidence that they both arrive essentially at the same period of time.

Perry:

In the cosmic scheme of things, he's not. But yeah, but they're both following an event. So the astrophage has migrated from Tau Ceti out to the other star systems. I don't know the distance between Rocky's sun and Tau Ceti seems to be a little bit closer, maybe. So maybe it got to Tau Ceti, it got to 40 Eridani first. And so they were further advanced maybe in their starships and just took off quicker and got there and been there for a few years before the Earth spaceship got there. You don't really get a basic idea of how long it took them to actually develop the spaceship and get things going, but what we should say, and what I didn't say is that, and you sort of alluded to, which people need to be aware of, is that in order for the spaceship to leave Earth and get through to Tau City, they actually have to use the astrophase that they have. Farmed, if you like, and use it as fuel. Because, as you say, there seems to be a process where they are able to convert the astrophage almost directly from matter into energy. which is a little bit okay, a little bit dodgy. Yeah, but it there's always dodgy things in just about all of this. Just about every science fiction film you see. You know, we're traveling faster than the speed of light. Well, they're not doing that here.

David:

No, no, that's fair.

Perry:

There is a problem which they don't make a lot of noise about it, but it is mentioned here, that although they're traveling to a far star system, I don't quite know how long ship time is, but three, four years to be able to get there. And back on Earth, of course, it's 11 years and then they have to wait to get the information back from the star system back to Earth. Another 11 odd years. So you're talking,

minimum 22, 25 years to be able to go there and get the information back again. So they don't mess about with that at all, which I thought was a good thing. Yeah, I still think though that there's a lot of good things that go on in this, and I can't quite understand how you feel as though things weren't moving fairly quickly in the time that Grace and Rocky are trying to work things out.

David:

No, it's okay there. I think it's the time, the flashbacks. There seems to be, I don't know, I remember, particularly when they're on the on the\\they're on a liner or something out there at some point.

Perry:

Yeah, yeah, they're on an aircraft carrier.

David:

Yeah, that's right, that's right. Yeah, that just seemed that just seemed to go on way too long.

Perry:

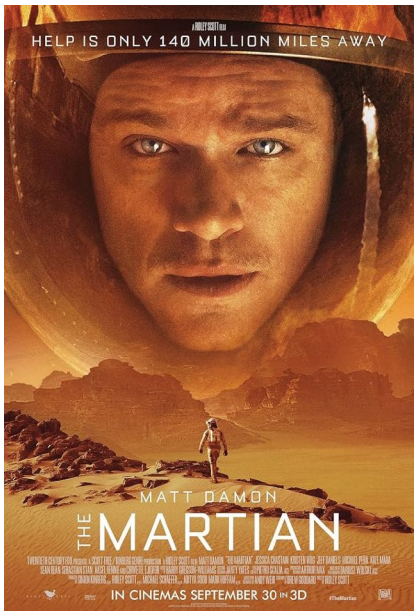
Well, the reason why they're on the aircraft carrier is because they are trying to produce extra astrophage. And astrophase being so volatile, so energetic, if they make a mistake, they'll blow the hell out of everything. And there's one point where she says, "Well, that's why we're on the ocean. If everything blows up, it just blows this ship up, and that's it. You know, it doesn't destroy half a continent." So they've got to be very careful about how they do that. Although I would have thought it would have been better to be doing it either on the moon or in space somewhere. Anyway, that's another question entirely. No, I think that the flashbacks basically help Grace to try and work out what it is, where he's from, what he's doing, how he got to where he was. And as I said he doesn't actually find out really how he got to where he was until almost the very end of the film and I'm not going to explain that because that gives away everything.

David:

That's a major spoiler, yes.

Perry:

A major spoiler. But the I think they're important because it builds up his interaction with the project team and how he got there and what everybody else is doing, and also the fact that he has to deal with the fact that for the people on the spaceship, it's a one-way trip. I was a little bit dubious about this in terms of the fuel. Well, we've got up to speed and we've run out of fuel. They used all the fuel to get up to light speed. And then of course, once you get up to near light speed, once you get halfway, you have to turn around and go the other way and then start slowing down. So you're only going to be spending a very short period of your time up at your maximum speed. And I suppose what they're doing is they're using half the fuel to get up to up to speed and another half to get back down again. To get back down to the point where they can stop in the system without just flying straight past it and never being able to stop. So, yeah, look, I still, I think that the overall appeal of the film outweighs any of those little nits that you happen to be picking there, David. I can see your point, but they didn't bother me in the slightest while I was watching it. It flows, just flew, just flew over me the whole way and I was quite happy with it. I didn't have any difficulty.



David:

All right, well you've just you've just got to put me down as an old curmudgeon.

Perry:

Well, yeah, I think I'm gonna have to after this one. That's true. Did you like *The Martian*?

David:

I liked *The Martian*, I thought that was very good.

Perry:

Oh, okay.

David:

I liked the book and I liked the film, so I don't know.

Perry:

Yeah, but he spends an interminable amount of time growing potatoes, and yet he didn't like that. I mean. Get on with it. Just grow the bloody potatoes.

David:

Yeah, it's a good comparison. I don't know quite why I liked *The Martian* so much and hated this one so much. I didn't hate this film, but I just didn't like it so much. I actually enjoyed his second book actually, *Artemis*, which I believe someone's going to make into a film.

Perry:

Well, you would have to think so. I haven't read that one yet. You would have to think so, given the way that *The Martian* and this one have done, and this one's going absolute gangbusters, as the last one did.

David:

Yeah, yeah. Oh, they make a heap of money out of it, there's no question, yeah. *Artemis* is set on the moon, so that's interesting. It's got a female lead, a teenage girl who's the protagonist in *Artemis*.

Perry:

Okay, okay.

David:

I didn't mind that book at all, but it doesn't seem to have, you know, received much attention so far. So well it'll be interesting if they make a film.

Perry:

I must admit I haven't read it. So it'll be interesting to see what they make of it. And it'd also be interesting to see what Andy Weir does next. I mean, I think his book, *The Martian,* didn't do well initially.

David:

It was self-published I think initially, wasn't it?

Perry:

I think it was self-published here and nobody would publish it for him and look what it's gone and done and you know I don't think he has the problem about finding a publisher anymore David.

David:

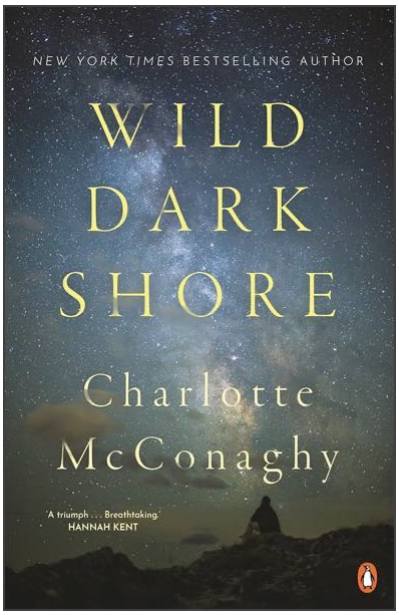
No, no, no, I shouldn't think so, no.

Perry:

No, I think not. All right, I think we're done with the film. Shall we move on to the book or books that you're going to be talking about?

Wild Dark Shore by Charlotte McConaghy

David:

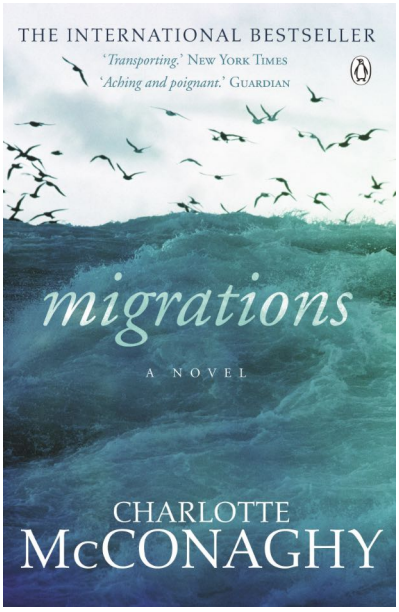


Yeah, well I hope I don't go on for too long, so you'll have to start frowning at me. Okay, so this the book we're going to talk about is *Wild Dark Shore* by Charlotte McConaghy. Now I haven't been able to find out a lot of biographical detail about her. apart from the fact that she's Australian, she's apparently in her thirties at the moment. She lives in Sydney and has two children. I only know the fact that she has two children because she dedicated her last book to her children. And according to Wikipedia, she has a master's degree from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, and she's been involved in scriptwriting for several years. And although it's not at all on her Wikipedia page, which needs updating I think.

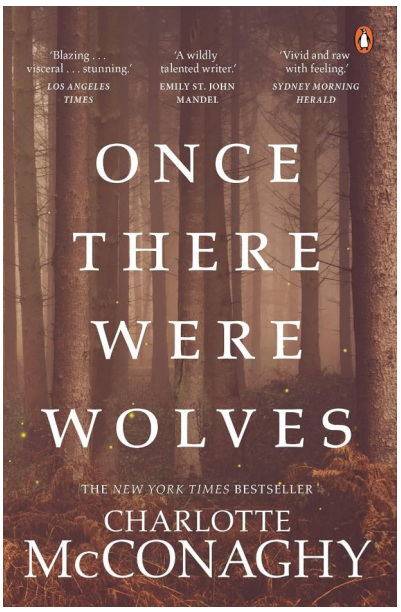
There was a tantalizing clue at the back of her novel *Migrations* which tells me that she's actually written a number of speculative fiction books. So I went looking. And indeed, if you look on Goodreads and search under her name, which I don't think there's any confusion, it definitely is her. She's written more than a dozen young adult fantasy novels in three different series. And they all look interesting. I'm not into fantasy much myself, but they'd probably be well worth looking into. But yeah, she's written heaps. Anyway, I digress.

What we do know is that since 2020 she's so far written three highly regarded adult literary novels, each of which has hit *The New York Times* bestseller list. So I'm going to talk a bit about all three of these books. As I say, bear with me. So the three novels are *Migrations*, which was published in 2020, *Once There Were Wolves* published in 2022 and now *Wild Dark Shore* which was published just last year. The first book of hers I read was *Once They Were Wolves*. I saw that it was listed on, she actually won the Davitt Award in 2022, which is the Australian Award for best crime written by female authors. So in preparation for this episode I got hold of a copy of *Migrations* and I've read all the way through it, enjoyed it greatly. And I've just refinished rereading *Wild Dark Shore*. Listeners to this podcast may recall that I nominated *Wild Dark Shore* as my second best book I read during 2025 and it only improved on rereading so I would now place it at the top. Since we're meant to be discussing *Wild Dark Shore*, I'll be

concentrating on that shortly, but I do want to say a few words about the other two books.



All three books demonstrate, because there's a certain consistency across all of them. All three books demonstrate McConaughey's passion about the natural world and her deep concern about the effects of climate change. All of them feature complex and interesting female characters, characters who have experienced significant trauma or loss. and are struggling to cope. And of the three books, *Migrations* is set furthest into the future. It's set when in a time when all wild animals and birds have been driven to extinction by the ravages of climate change, or almost all. Tigers, elephants, rhinos, eagles, they're all gone forever. Even the common crow has been declared extinct. So, the book is told from the first-person point of view of a woman called Frannie Stone, who is burdened by a hidden trauma going back into her childhood, and there's another trauma which we only discover very late in the book. And though she has fallen in love and married, she can't stay put in one place. She feels a constant urge to move on, and she spends long periods away from her husband, who is a passionate academic, who is an expert on ornithology. As the book opens, Franny is in Greenland. She's tagging, putting radio tags on some of the few remaining Arctic terns, which are small little birds, which migrate from one pole of the world to the other. That's their migration path. It's amazing. It's quite true. How she plans to do this, how she plans to fold them, why she's so obsessed with them, and what's happened in her past, slowly revealed through the course of the book. It's a really engaging story, thoroughly recommended.



In the second, in the next book, in *Once There Were Wolves*, which is set only a little bit into the future, we follow a character called Inty Flynn, who's working for a group set on introducing wolves or reintroducing wolves into the wilds of Scotland. But that plan meets severe resistance from the locals for obvious reasons. And this resistance eventually leads to violence and possibly murder. When one of the local farmers is found dead and his body savaged by some wild animal, suspicion obviously falls on Inti's wolves. And as I wrote in my review of the book some time ago, this is a gripping, powerful story. There's a romance, there's a murder mystery, there's a nail-biting struggle for survival. There's a deeply involving backstory of this woman and her sister, and through it all, an environmental message, which is not as clear-cut as you might think.

So finally, finally, Perry, I come to a *Wild Dark Shore*. This begins with someone drowning after her boat is wrecked on the rocks of a remote island. She doesn't drown, though, she's dragged from the water by a teenage girl who then runs for help. The island is called Shearwater, and it's part way between Australia and the Antarctic. It's loosely modeled on the real Macquarie Island, but there are lots of

differences. Now the person who was drowning is a middle-aged woman called Rowan, and the girl who saved her is called Finn. Rowan, while unconscious, is carried to where Finn and her family live, which is in a now no longer operational lighthouse. The family consists of Dominic Salt, the father, who is a powerful brooding man, still haunted by the loss of his wife almost ten years before. and his three children, Raph, the oldest boy, Fen, who's a teenage girl about seventeen years old, and Orle, the youngest, who is nine years old. They've all lived on Shearwater for the previous eight years. And no one else now lives on the island. Until recently there was a research base, but all the scientists have now left. Dominic has stayed behind to help maintain facilities, in particular to look after a huge seed vault dug into the permafrost. which has been built there in an attempt to preserve these seeds for the future, to be able to keep these plants for the future in case humanity might need them after a cataclysm. But climate change is very well advanced, as we'll discover.

And as Rowan discovers, as the book goes on, there are a number of points of tension, high tension, between the members of the small family, and her arrival only serves to exacerbate these tensions. She begins to be certain, though, that they're hiding something from her. Perhaps they're lying to her. But then Rowan, too, is lying, or at least carefully concealing the truth about why she came to be on the voyage which resulted in her being shipwrecked on this island. The author feeds us small snippets of information which slowly begin to outline a disturbing picture. So there are several mysteries in the book which are only resolved late in the piece. More than one tragedy is revealed along the way, and there's a desperately tense climax. So it's a real page turner in that respect as you get towards the end.

Over it all is this theme of the devastation which climate change is bringing to the island and its fauna and to the world, and the author communicates this deep sense of sadness and despair about this. But more than anything, this is a novel of character and relationships. There are two first-person narratives, one that of Rowan and the other of Dominic Salt, with the experiences of each of the other characters given from an omniscient point of view. Each of these characters has considerable depth and interest in a back story that we slowly come to understand. But looking at Dominic, he is laser-focussed on protecting his children. His love for them is a major feature and a plot driver of the book. And there are several very moving passages where this love is made clear. But he's not a perfect father, he's too reserved and struggling with his own grief, which makes it hard for him to communicate with his children. The arrival of Rowan just disturbs these relationships in various ways. And she too is a complicated character, living with guilt dating back to her childhood. and still suffering from the losses that she sustained because of a bushfire which destroyed the home and garden that she had built herself. I could go on for hours, but I can see that Perry started to go to sleep. So I'll I think I've said enough. It's highly, highly recommended. I really loved it. What do you think of the book, Perry?

Perry:

I really enjoyed it as well. I thought it was one of the best books I've read in some time. I was really taken by the fact that, in essence, well, when you get to the end, when you look back and you thought, I know there's a mystery here, but it's not really a big, overly complicated mystery. And yet I'm very impressed with the way the author's able to eke it out over, this is not a huge book. It's like close to 300 pages or something. So a good size. It's not, she hasn't gone berserk and gone to

500 pages. And then if she'd done that, you would have been thinking, oh, God, just get on with it. But here, just as you're starting to think, well, something more must be happening, she changes the point of view of the main character, or a story about the main character, and then you get a little bit more. It just drops beautifully. I think it's a very, very well-timed exposition of the plot, the mystery, and the resolution of it at the end. Now as you say it all builds up and suddenly blam, you get everything all together at the end, which of course is pretty much what we're after. It's pretty exciting stuff near the end there. I mean, there's a hell of a lot going on. Every now and again, something happens, and you go, "Well, I hadn't expected that". And I thought that was good. But I think you're perfectly correct that this is more a novel of character than just about anything else. The mystery is there to eke out the characters, and the characters then release small bits of the mystert. It's beautifully handled. Very, very well done. Yes, and you said that you went back and read it a second time. I could certainly see the reasons for doing so. There's a lot of books that you read, and you think, yeah, okay, all right, then you move on. But this one is intriguing enough for a heck of a lot of reasons. To think that it is very definitely worthwhile going back and reading again.

David:

Yeah, for sure.

Perry:

It's got a lot going on in it, and I was very, very impressed. I will be going back and reading the others.

David:

Yeah, true.

Perry:

I'll go back and read *Migrations* first and then come to the second one. I think she's going to be one that we're going to be watching quite a lot. Now I know that this book's already been on a number of award short lists. You and I, David, are waiting for the Davidttand the Ned Kelly Awards to see whether it fits into those categories and genres.

David:

Yeah, it's not quite crime, though, is it?

Perry:

No, but there is a mystery there, and so it's a little bit, it's hard to determine where you would want to put this. The book itself doesn't, as I recall, state that it fit sunder any particular genre. It's got a taut psychological thriller. Yeah, okay. Anyway, that's what Hannah Kent, the Australian author, had to say about it. No, I thought it was an excellent book. It'll be interesting to see whether it gets picked up for any of the climate change awards as well, because there's a few climate change fiction awards starting to pop up now. And I think it'll be interesting to see whether it gets considered for them. Maybe it will, maybe it won't. But it certainly is in that genre. But all it's doing is it's just utilizing something which now has become commonly accepted, commonplace. Climate change is happening, it is causing a lot of environmental damage, There are seed banks around the world, and it's just interesting to see that this one, fictitious though it is, how it's handled and how it's dealt with.

No, very impressed with this one, David. Very impressed indeed. I'm glad you decided that we should read it.

David:
Good.

Perry:
I was very happy about it, indeed. Very.

David:
Good, good, good.

What Else We've Been Reading and Watching

Perry:
All right, okay. What other things have you been reading, David?

Bad Actors by Mick Herron

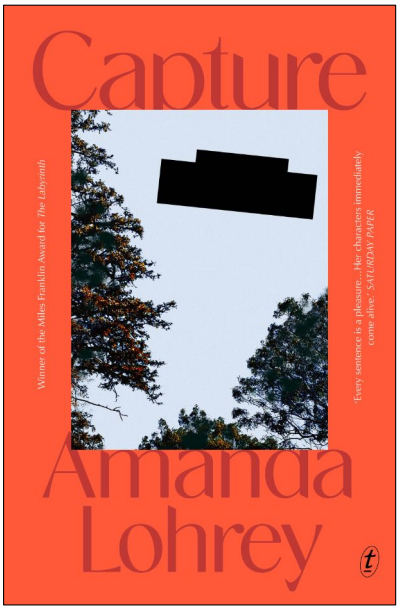
David:
Well, um, I finished another Mick Herron Slough House book, *Bad Actors*.

Perry:
Okay.

David:
I was amused at the end of that, in the acknowledgements at the end of that, that he says the title "Bad Actors" does not refer to the TV series made from his books. So that was good. I don't think I mentioned that last time, maybe I did.

Capture by Amanda Lowry

David:
I read *Capture* by Amanda Lowry, which is another book by an author that we read, her *Labyrinth* a few years ago, and I read her *Conversion* a year or so ago. So it's another from Text Publishing. Nice cover by our friend Chong. And as you can sort of guess from the cover, which has got a sort of redacted shape of a flying saucer, it's kind of about flying saucers. The main character is a psychiatrist, a psychologist I think, and he's sort of tasked with investigating claims of alien abduction and looking into those. won't give anything away about it, but it's an intriguing sort of book. I still have to write my review. So I thank Text Publishing for letting me have a review copy of that, but now I've got to go on and do the review.



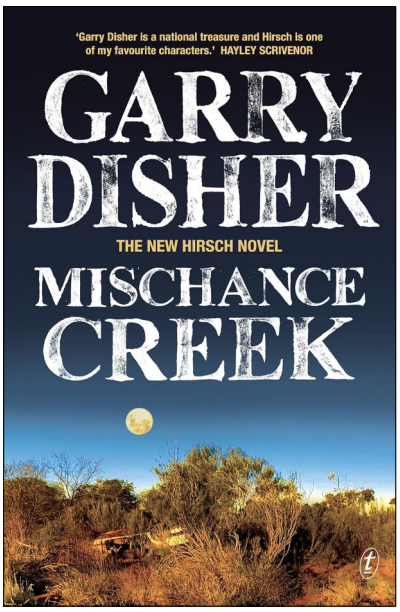
Perry:
Yeah, better get on with it.

David:

I must get to that very shortly. So that was that, and the other two books I've read since last episode were the Charlotte McConaghy books.

Mischance Creek by Garry Disher

Perry:



Okay, cool. Well, the book that I read that I wanted to chat about, which is probably one that you've read, *Mischance Creek* by Garry Disher. Okay, this is the fifth in the author's Hirsch series of novels which we've discussed, set in the mid-north of South Australia around..

David:

Yeah, no, I haven't got to that yet.

Perry:

...the town of Burra, although Burra is renamed in this particular series, because Disher grew up in the area and I grew up about sixty, eighty K's away from it. But a lot of what he talks about, the environment, the countryside's pretty much the same. Except in this case, Burra, of course, was a major copper mining centre in South Australia through the 1800s and into the early 1900s. And of course, whenever you get copper mining and whatever you get mining of any sort like that, there's a few old mine shafts around. The story revolves around a woman that Hirsch encounters. Hirsch is the local police officer, by the way. He's doing his rounds, doing a boring firearm audit. And he comes across a woman out in the back blocks wandering around, and when he talks to her, he finds out that she's the daughter of a couple that died about seven years previously. Well, sort of. She is the daughter. They found the father, because the father was found at the bottom of a mineshaft. So they have him. But the mother was never found. They don't know whether she's alive or dead. But there's weird stuff that was going on about the investigation and the daughter has found some extra evidence in her parents' possessions. She's only just got to the point where she feels as though she can work through her parents' possessions. And she's found some things which might be of interest. So she and Hirsch sort of revolve around each other, and as it gets closer and closer, near the end of the novel. The stuff that Hirsch is looking into and the stuff that she's looking into slowly start coming together. It's one of those great Disher novels that takes a while to get going, but you just don't care. I mean, you really like the fact that he's out there and he's talking to people and you're getting all these different country types. and he makes a few disparaging remarks about other rural noir novels, David, which I think you'll find quite interesting. Because he picks a book up, goes, Oh god, another one of those and throws it down. So he's making a few sly comments about books in the genre in which he writes, but he does it as well as anybody.

As we've said in the past, and we've spoken about Gary Discher quite a lot on this podcast that over the years, that you just need to keep reading him. Because he's always putting something excellent out all the time. Every year there's another one that comes out, and I look forward to it. And they're great, they're just tremendous.

David:
I'll look forward to that.

Perry:
All right, film. Have you seen any other films?

Train Dreams, directed by Clint Bentley

David:
Well, I did. I saw on your recommendation I watched *Train Dreams*. That was, I agree, it was an excellent film. It was very, very moving. There were a couple of tears I shed during that for reasons you might imagine.

Perry:
Yes.

Speed, directed by Jan de Bont

David:
I re-watched the original *Speed* with Keanu Reeves. It was well worth re-watching actually. It was a lot of fun.

Perry:
It's pretty silly. I mean, this is the one set in the bus with the bomb, isn't it?

David:
Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was well done, I thought.

Perry:
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Civil War, directed by Alex Garland

David:
And I saw *Civil War*, which is written by Alex Garland and directed by Alex Garland.

Perry:
Okay.

David:
That was excellent. It wasn't what I expected. Yes, there's all the civil war sort of stuff and the violence and so on, but it's really, again, I look at character and the sort of passion of photojournalists. combat journalists to get there and document what's going on. And that's kind of really what I thought the focus of that was.

Ready Player One, directed by Steven Spielberg

David:
And I rewatched *Ready Player One*, which was fun, directed by Steven Spielberg. It was quite a lot of fun, nothing else much you can say about it. Yeah, that's about it.

Silence of the Lambs directed by Jonathan Demme

Perry:



I want to talk about the one that I saw just recently and that was I went back and re-watched *Silence of the Lambs* directed by Jonathan Demme and released in 1991. This of course has got Jodie Foster as FBI agent Clarice Starling, and Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter. Now this wasn't the first depiction of Hannibal Lecter on film. That was Brian Cox in *Manhunter*. That had been released somewhere in the mid eighties, I think. Anyway, Hopkins, everybody remembers Hopkins because of this highly intelligent criminal who is seemingly able to see through everybody's artifice and get directly through to people. It's been a while since I'd seen this and you know just about everybody, both Foster and Hopkins, won Academy Awards and Jonathan Demme won Best Director. It didn't win Best Film. I'm not sure what won Best Film that year, but anyway it didn't win Best Film. But it also won Best Adapted Screenplay. So, you know, everything sort of tagged along pretty well. But the thing that really stuck with me this time when I was watching it was how much it uses the male gaze to give you a sense of the isolation of the Clarice Starling character. Now, Jodie Foster's not terribly tall. But every time she gets into a lift, everybody there looks like they're about eight feet tall. All the blokes around her are just really enormous. And everywhere she stands, they all stare at her because she's this short, shortish, female FBI agent working in the behavioral sciences section with serial killers and dealing with stuff that they think seems a little bit odd, that she shouldn't be there. And so they all just basically look at her the whole time. And she generally spends when she's in a room, she's the only female in the whole room. So it's really quite interesting and well done by Demme into setting that up. And he actually has a couple of situations where she talks to a male FBI agent, walks off scene, and he holds the shot of the male watching her walk away.

And then you get to the end where she actually, I'm not giving spoilers away because this film is like 35 years old. If you haven't seen it by now, bad luck, you should go and see it. At the end, when she comes across Buffalo Bill and she gets into the house where he is. And he's following her. He's turned all the lights off and he's following her around with these night goggles. And he's staring at her again. And you see the view through the night goggles of him staring at her. So it's a male gaze again. It's just, when I saw it, I thought, this is really obvious. Why hadn't I noticed it before? Because it's such a brilliant technique of being able to do this, but subtle. But when you realise what's going on, you thought, wow, this is really well done. It really puts her in a spot of spot of menace the whole time. And it's not just from the criminals that she's chasing, but also from the males that she's dealing with.

Certainly worth a rewatch, David, if you can get a chance. After all this time it holds up very well. The script is great. The acting's good. And as I said, the direction here, when you think about how he set things up and blocks the scenes in terms of who looks where and fantastic stuff. Really, really enjoyed it. I'd recommend going back and seeing it again.

David:

Anything on TV?

Perry:

No, no, no, not much on the way TV, just watching bits and pieces. I haven't got anything that's sort of standing out. You know, it's that situation where you either watch films or you watch TV and I've be watching more films and I've been out and about a bit more. So yeah, again, I've just got to set more time down to doing certain things and, because as we've discussed before, there's only a certain number of hours in the day when you can do things, and so you've got other things to do around the house, or go out and do the shopping, or seeing people, or going away. And you know, you've only got a certain amount of time you can allocate, and it either goes to watching television, watching a film, or reading a book. And it goes through cycles, and my cycle mainly now is film for a little while, and then I'm keeping the reading up. Trying to do more than last year, and it seems to be moving ahead a little bit more. But now I seem to have slotted back into just one book a week again. Which a lot of people would say was a lot, but for you and me, David, that seems like it's not a lot. It seems like about half the level that we should be reading, or at least fifty percent lower. So anyway, got to push some of that. But there may be a couple of books that I have to read for our next episode.

David:

Yeah.

Windup and Next Episode

Perry:

And do you want me to tell the listener what it is we're going to be talking about next time?

David:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, do that, that would be good.

Perry:

Okay, so the book we're going to be reading is *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, which I think was released in the early nineties. And I have to tell you, David, I've never read it.

David:

Yeah. Oh, that'll be interesting 'cause it's dated in many ways. There's a lot about the computer industry and the metaverse and so on, but it's amazing how prescient it is. I haven't read it for a long, long time, so I'll go back. I'll enjoy going back and rereading it. That'll be very interesting. I think that was his first novel. He'd written a couple of other books which were like technical works. Technical books, he wrote one called *First There Was the Command Line*. So that's a bit technical. So yeah, he's a very interesting writer, but it's good to go back to *Snow Crash* because after that book, he started to get into bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger books until you get to his massive *Baroque Trilogy*, which is like three very, very thick books set in the Baroque period of the world, which are well worth reading regardless.

Perry:
All right, but they're bricks.

David:
But nevertheless, anyway, *Snow Crash* is very readable because it's short.

Perry:
Right, even better. That's what we like to hear, about short books.

David:
Yep, yep, the film.

Perry:
Okay, so the film we're going to be talking about is *The Prestige*. Directed by Christopher Nolan. This is also one that's been around for quite some time, based on the novel by Christopher Priest. So, what I might try and do is try and read The Prestige early, read the book, and then go in and watch the film again. Now, I have seen this film previously, and so it has got Hugh Jackman, Christian Bale?

David:
Yep, Christian Bale, yeah.

Perry:
Christian Bale in it.

David:
And Scarlett Johansson is it?

Perry:
Right.

David:
No. This I can't remember the female character.

Perry:
Couldn't tell you. Does this one have David Bowie as Tesla?

David:
yes.

Perry:
Oh, right, okay. Well, that's cool. That's interesting. That's right, I do remember bits and pieces of it then. So it has been quite some time since I've seen this film, so quite interested in having a look at it. And I'm interested to see as well up front, just give you a bit of a nod about what I'm thinking about here, as to whether Nolan is better with other people's material rather than his own.

Because he wrote *Tenet,* and I saw that recently, and I didn't want to discuss it because I thought it's a mess. It's all over the place. I can't work out what the hell is going on. And I wasn't as invested in or interested in it enough to go back and watch it again. Some people say it's spectacular. You and I have issues with *Interstellar*. And so, yeah, I'll be interested to see whether it's a matter of whose material he uses as to whether he makes a good decent film or not. I really liked *Oppenheimer*. I really liked that.

David:
Yeah, for sure.

Perry:
I was so-so about *Dunkirk*. You know, look good, but frankly, yeah, again, a bit of a bit of a mess as well.

David:
Forgettable.

Perry:
You know, it didn't quite work. Anyway, so…

David:
Yeah, I'm interested.

Perry:
Alright, so we've got some interesting stuff to look forward to next time, so I've got to get on to it.

David:
We should probably say that the timing of the next episode is very uncertain for various reasons.

Perry:
Yes, it is.

David:
You're going overseas, I'm moving house.

Perry:
Yep, so I won't be going overseas for long, but we'll be away for a couple of weeks in early June and you're moving house. And moving house has a tendency to be a little bit more important than working on the podcast. Although, seeing the film, which I gather is on SBS, *The Prestige* is showing on SBS. It's got ads, but so what? You can put up with the ads, that's okay. SBS doesn't flood you with ads continuously. They have them about every three-quarters of an hour or an hour or so, so that's not so bad. And you'll be able to watch that and maybe a few other things as well to take your mind off the pain of having to move.

David:
Yes, yes.

Perry:
All right. All right. Well, we will figure out that when it happens, David, and good luck with the move. I hope it all goes well.

David:
Thank you.

Perry:
And we shall talk next time.

David:
Indeed. Alright, thank you.

Perry:
Yep, see ya.

David:
See you next time.