



## The Snow Geese

*William Fiennes*

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Snow geese spend their summers in the Canadian Arctic, on the tundra. Each autumn they migrate south, to Delaware, California and the Gulf of Mexico. In the spring they fly north again. William Fiennes decided to go with them and to write about his travels.

## **The Snow Geese Details**

Date : Published March 5th 2010 by Picador USA (first published 2001)

ISBN : 9780330375795

Author : William Fiennes

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## From Reader Review The Snow Geese for online ebook

### Jennie Nelson says

I got bored.

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### J M says

Read this review by Robert MacFarlane and you too will put this on your 'to read' list:

<http://gu.com/p/44bkv/sbl>

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### Faye says

The Snow Geese is an odd little book. The author William Fiennes, becomes fascinated with snow geese while he is recuperating from a long illness at his family home, and decides to follow the geese as they migrate across America.

I thought when I bought the book that The Snow Geese would be part memoir/part travel diary (a bit like Notes from a Small Island by Bill Bryson) but instead it was a book filled almost completely with tangents. Fiennes is a good writer and some of his descriptions are evocative and lovely but there doesn't seem to be a real central theme to the book. For me the most cohesive part of the book is at the very beginning where Fiennes is describing his illness, some of his school-days and his family home. For the rest of the time he doesn't talk about himself at all. He describes in detail the clothing of every person he meets and the conversations he has with them and the various places he stops in along the way but there were no real personal insights or the sense that he really learns anything meaningful on this epic journey through America.

Some of the chapters were devoted to facts and figures about birds which makes sense, but other pages were filled with statistics about railways and trains, volcanoes, and studies on homesickness which didn't seem to serve a purpose other than to meet a word-count.

I kept waiting for the 'great revelation' where Fiennes would pull together all these different stories, tangents, facts and figures to come up with some epiphany or overall message but it never came. He got to Baffin Island, saw the geese, ate a few of them and then couldn't wait to come home again.

All this isn't to say I didn't like the book; I did. It was a peaceful and relaxing read, and a nice reasonably informative story. I liked it enough to want to keep the book rather than put it back into a charity shop. I'm not sure if I will read it again but I'll keep it on the shelf just in case.

Overall rating: 3/5 stars

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### **Agnese says**

Traveling from Texas to Baffin Island following the snow geese while they migrate to their nesting grounds, guided by the sun, the stars, the earth magnetism. A very interesting journey but told in a detached way, as if the author is afraid to be enthralled by nature's call and lose his defined, though weakened by an illness, identity. The purpose of his journey is to regain faith in life and he undertakes it as if he were swallowing a medicine. No excitement, no awe, no flowing love. The narration, though elegant at times, lacks brilliance. The author feels lonely and homesick from the start, compares his longing for home to the geese migration to their birth land, overlooking the fact that the geese might enjoy the sun, the wind, the changing lights along their journey. He accomplishes his project—arrives at the geese nesting home (...just one of their homes) – but all along the way he looks at the new environments of land, animals and people from a distance, feels a stranger and seems to need it, as if by asserting himself as different from his surroundings he strengthens his own identity and nourishes his life recently threatened. The feeling at the end of this engaging story is that he didn't live this unusual experience as intensely as he could have, that he missed emotions and discoveries, and so did the reader. A potentially fascinating journey that turned out to be simply interesting.

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### **David R. says**

The concept is wonderful: Fiennes, inspired by Gallico's "The Snow Goose" and a life changing illness, sets out to follow the migration of the Snow Goose (*chen caerulescens*) from wintering grounds in south central Texas to its breeding home on Baffin Island. It's a planes, trains, and automobiles story as he moves northward, always ahead of the geese. Unfortunately, it disappoints on two counts. Most importantly, the geese hardly show up. Fiennes is ultimately more attracted to his encounters with people along the way, some quite eccentric, most of whom have no interest whatsoever in Snow geese nor his quest. And, the end of the road, Foxe Land in the tundra, there's no climax, no drama, no epiphanal moment. It's jolly ho, the trip is done, back to the UK for me! This is probably not the book for the die-hard birder but will suit for those fascinated by travel adventures in improbable places.

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### **Judy says**

Given that it is about travel, wild geese and a personal quest, I expected to really enjoy this book and was disappointed not to.

It would be crass to knock something written with important personal issues at heart; it is indeed a brave thing to write such a book. Perhaps it is a matter of not sharing the author's attention to what I consider minutiae.

For all that, I have to say there is some wonderfully descriptive writing in it, a wealth of amazingly precise vocabulary and original phraseology, and a lot of information about the science of bird migration.

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## **Myriam says**

Juste ennuyeux...

Je n'ai pas aimé ce livre et me suis forcée à le terminer.

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## **Jennifer says**

A beautifully written meditation on what home means and one man's journey to define it following a serious illness, told through the lens of a natural history book on the migration of snow geese. Somehow it manages at the same time to be one of the more compelling American road trip memoirs I've read. I love the detours the book takes into the etymology of nostalgia and homesickness. The prose is of a particular variety of precision and care that requires equal care in reading. In lesser hands such care could have been tedious, but Fiennes manages to make it a tool of transcendence.

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## **Kate says**

A book sort of about travel, we are told he had an illness but none of it is mentioned in the book. He has interesting things to say about home and dwelling place. Talking about God being our dwelling place. I liked that a lot. I like geese but he follows the geese, doesn't like them being eaten for food. Drove me a bit potty lol

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## **Jessie says**

Overall, I really didn't like this book. I had to force myself to read it, only because I usually feel obligated to finish books I start.

I found it to be really repetitive, disconnected and too descriptive. It seems like 70% of the book was just imagery. Imagery is great, I love me some imagery, but there was just too much and what was being described in such strenuous detail was usually uninteresting or unimportant. Finnes added a lot of antidotes that were mildly interesting. These varied from the stories he heard on his journey to the history of nostalgia. It was apparent that most of these blurbs revolved around the central theme of home. Though it was easy to see, I wish the author had connected the ideas and the theme (even just subtly), rather than leave it fragmented. I realize it's part of the format of the memoir, but I think it was necessary; it would have been possible to achieve without compromising that format. The author mentioned some of the same things multiple times, sometimes it seemed word for word. These aspects resulted in the book not being exciting enough to hold my attention.

To be fair, it wasn't just Finnes' writing that caused my disliking of this book; it was also the subject. A big part of why I didn't like it was that I simply do not care about the migratory patterns of birds. At all, really. Why did I choose to read this book? Who knows.

When I don't like a book (which isn't often), I usually feel like I'm missing something that would make the book worth while. But with The Snow Geese, I'm quite confident that I caught all there was to catch, and it

wasn't enough for me. However, I will say it was usually quite well-written and the sentences flowed pretty nicely.

But yeah.. all of my friends couldn't understand why I chose to read this book and looking back, neither do I.

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### **Veronica says**

I wasn't sure about this book to start with, but I was gradually drawn in. Recovering from a long and debilitating illness, Fiennes comes across a copy of Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose*, which he read as a child, and is prompted to follow migrating snow geese from Texas to the Arctic tundra. His journey away from the confines of home gradually reawakens for him the joy of being alive, but like the birds he eventually also longs to return to the familiar himself.

This is a slow, contemplative book. You get the impression of a silent, solitary figure, who says little about himself but carefully observes the world around him and the people he meets, then painstakingly sets telling details down on paper, meticulously choosing each word. This reticence means that you aren't even sure whether he likes or dislikes the people he meets on his journey. But his descriptions of the emptiness and silence of the tundra at the end of the book are amazing.

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### **Rebecca says**

**(2.5)** Having recovered from an illness that hit him at age 25 while he was studying for a doctorate, Fiennes set off to track the migration route of the snow goose, which starts down in the Gulf of Mexico and goes north to the Arctic territories of Canada. He was inspired by his father's love of birdwatching and Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose* (which I have not read). I thought this book couldn't fail to be great, what with themes of travel, birds, illness and identity. However, Fiennes gets bogged down in details. When he stays with friendly Americans in Texas he gives you every detail of their home décor, meals and way of speaking; when he takes a Greyhound bus ride he recounts every conversation he had with his random seatmates. This is too much about the grind of travel and not enough about the natural spectacles he was searching for. And then when he gets up to the far north *he eats snow goose*. So anyway, I ended up just skimming this one for the birdwatching bits. I did like Fiennes's writing, just not what he chose to focus on, so I'll read his other memoir, *The Music Room*.

[We purchased a remainder copy on one of our first trips to Hay-on-Wye.]

**Did you know...?** “The black tips to the wings weren’t decorative: the concentration of melanin pigments – the pigments responsible for dark colouring – strengthens the primary flight feathers, making them more resilient, an adaptation often seen in birds that undertake long migrations.

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### **Alexandra says**

He's good with descriptions, but goes a bit overboard comparing one thing to another and using similes. There's no denying his creativity but all the same you can scale it back a bit, Bro. Otherwise it feels like he's trying to hit a word count. Part of me wonders if this would have been better as a novella- it seems a little light at times, like he planned a grand adventure but then nothing terribly exciting happened so he got a bit

stuck. It is poignant and lonely at times, friendly and warm at others. Like traveling in reality. Doesn't quite meet expectations. But Fiennes has a deft hand so I can happily recommend.

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### **Bettie? says**

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

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### **Paul says**

This book was inspired by Fiennes read in of The Snow Goose when younger, and after a period in hospital, when he had a burning longing to return home to familiar and comforting surroundings. He wondered what drove the Snow goose to travel all across America, from Texas to Alaska.

Part travel book and part natural history, Fiennes follows the route that the geese take by coach, meeting a series of characters along the way. At each point that the geese move is determined by the conditions, so occasionally he gets ahead of them, and sees them arrive. In one location he is asked to house sit at one point by someone he has just met and goes out to the place where they feed and watches them arrive.

It is a beautifully written book, and effortless to read. He successfully manages to link his longing to returning home with the journey of the snow goose and their instinctive drive to travel huge distances. Well worth reading.

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