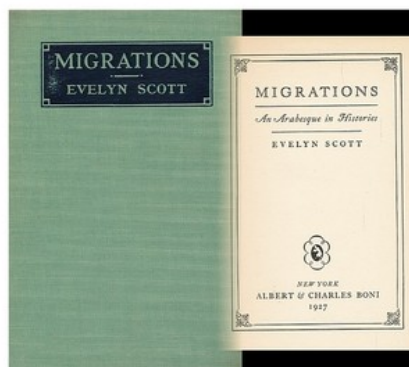




Migrations ; an Arabesque in Histories

Evelyn Scott

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Migrations: An Arabesque in Histories, the first book in Scott's historical trilogy that includes *The Wave* (1929) and *A Calendar of Sin* (1931), depicts the migrations of a number of Southern characters out of the fictional Tennessee town of Mimms in the early 1850s. These characters include a runaway slave, a young married couple traveling toward opportunity in the golden state of California, and a young progressive chased out of town by a racist lynch mob. As Scott wrote in a letter to her friend Lola Ridge, explaining Migrations's subtitle, "it really is an arabesque--a scroll with the whirly gig line of one long journey accented with several minor whirly gigs" (qtd. in White 104). Interestingly, in the sparse critical discussion of this novel that exists, the central strand of this arabesque, the long narrative of Thomas and Melinda George's travel from Tennessee to California via Panama, has received less attention than the "minor whirly gigs," especially the book's treatment of black and mixed-raced characters. In neglecting the central "whirly gig" in the novel, Scott's critics have missed the primary focus of Migrations, its depiction of the cultural and identity crisis facing Southerners taken out of the South.

Scott's account of the journey of Doctor Thomas George and his young wife, Melinda, is based on her own family history, the story of her great aunt and uncle, whose actual journey becomes the model for the central plot. Having failed to establish a successful practice in Mimms, Thomas decides to try his fortune as a physician in California. The couple departs by ship from Virginia and stops briefly in Jamaica before landing in Panama. In Panama, they travel by mule over land to Panama City and board another ship which takes them to San Francisco. This trip is difficult for the couple for a number of reasons--neither has traveled outside of the country before, Melinda is in the early stages of pregnancy and is often sick on the trip, and, perhaps most importantly, outside of the South both feel very alienated from the world they find around them.

Migrations ; an Arabesque in Histories Details

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From Reader Review Migrations ; an Arabesque in Histories for online ebook

Julie Mercer says

I liked it !

Jonathan says

This is my third novel of hers, and the second I would deem a masterpiece. It is one of the most subtle and impressive explorations of the nature of freedom I have ever read. She explores the issue from all of the conceivable sides that would be in play in mid-19th century southern states. Her skillful use of interior monologue to slip between multiple points of view allows her to explore the varying conceptions of freedom and slavery during that period. From the runaway slave to the lyncher all are given the space and time to demonstrate the how and the why of their worldview. For a novel written in the 1920s by a female southern author, this is deeply impressive. It is an important work even if just for this reason alone.

The "migrations" of the title are, of course, both mental and geographic. Though the longer middle section, inspired by the true story of her Aunt, finds a newly-married couple migrating to California via Panama.

Finally, however, it is a joy to read from beginning to end. In particular the final 60 pages build to an almost breathless level of excitement and power. Highly recommended if you can find a copy.

Some stylistic examples:

" Corn pone and sweet potatoes like the darkies eat, a few motheaten Latin tomes for education, and a flourish of manners before the ladies-that's all father has... Edwin was terrified of seeming grotesque, of being seen by strangers in the light in which they saw his father. If only mother had not confused us with so much pretend morality. That was what he could not shake off."

And

"Good God," Thomas exclaimed, "we are wrecked. What do you think, Mr Hoyt? I must find my wife." Clinging to the wooden balustrade of some steps that lead to the cabins, Thomas felt his legs softening under him, and believed he heard screams. If this were his last moment-well, he could not think of anything at all, though the words, "women and children first, women and children first, " kept ringing in his brain, conveying to him, with sensations of weakness and nausea, some vague determination which he was too confused to articulate. After all his dalliance upon the one theme, the conception of himself in the role of a hero seemed quite unreal. He wanted to do what others did. Yes that was his first, last, and most resolute feeling, anguish, and in some fashion partaking of a kind of 'beauty'. He wanted to do what others did."

And

But the lane to the Quarters continued to open an abandoned perspective. Uncle Blossom did not move. Miss Sara was conscious of her ineffectualness, could almost see herself, her thin face under her crushed cap, her diminutive body, her wide sedate lady's petticoats, and her arms upreaching. Why had she not been born a man. Why had the men been sent away on other missions when the Captain was sinking and in a state like this. They should have come to her for their orders. What did anything matter but this--this last struggle against the--but was it inevitable. Her wrists slackened exhaustedly, and she half reclined herself against the long deal table upon which, in the morning, her precious bowls of milk were set out evenly for her to skim the cream from them.

No one had heard her. Staring across the stripped stubble of the brownish tobacco fields, she began to weep silently, her mouth, penciled in its fine lines of age and pain, quivering, her bleared gaze reproaching the distances. Thomas and Edwin do not know. They can not know. A long life--all over--and what for. But there was no need for the 'what-for.' Living-being-alive--was sufficient. We require no explanation of it. In God we trust. A long life. Ah, how she hoped yet to live a long time."

and

" Ready to expire, she gave up her efforts to shift the bed. It was too late now, truly. Footsteps were indeed audible, and some, as yet, indistinguishable cries. "Snuff dat candle, Bosh," she whispered, but, anticipating his uselessness, did not wait on him. Rushing forward, she laid her broad palm upon the wick. The candle guttered, went out redolently, and, from beneath the door, sagging above an uneven sill, the flat moonlight gushed suddenly, in faint blue traceries. Save for the vivid relief of a spot on the floor just before the door, the room was pitch-black. Mammy Mary, her fists clenched and shaking, sank on her knees, half suppliant, half defiant with a desperation which she recognized as futile. In the night invisible, the sound of shouting voices grew always louder. She could not see Bosh, and only guessed that he was beside her."
