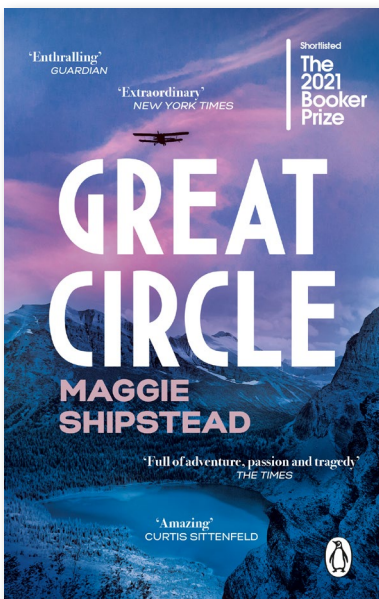


Women's Prize for Fiction 2022



2022 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

GREAT CIRCLE BY MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD



PLOT SUMMARY

From the night she is rescued as a baby out of the flames of a sinking ship, to the thrill of flying Spitfires during the war, via the day she joins a pair of daredevil pilots looping and diving over the rugged forests of her childhood, the life of Marian Graves has always been marked by a lust for freedom and danger.

In 1950, she embarks on her life's dream: to fly a great circle around the globe. But after a crash landing, she finds herself stranded on the Antarctic ice.

Half a century later, Hadley Baxter, a brilliant yet troubled Hollywood starlet, is irresistibly drawn to play Marian Graves, a role that will lead her to probe the deepest mysteries of the vanished pilot's life.

An enthralling journey across oceans and continents and a drama of exhilarating power, *Great Circle* is a story of loss and obsession, sacrifice and survival, of the unknowable mysteries of freedom, love and life itself.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Great Circle is a novel that tells two stories, with many echoes and resonances that link them together. Marian's is the story that dominates: we follow her from her birth to parents Annabel and Addison Graves, a ship's captain aboard one of the new, luxurious cruise liners built at around the same time as the Titanic, to growing up in Prohibition-era America, through the Great Depression and World War Two.

The second story belongs to Hadley, a famous actress living within the modern-day toxic Hollywood bubble. Planes and flying link her to Marian: both her parents die in a plane crash. Marian's mother Annabel commits suicide by staying with the sinking

cruise liner from which Marian and her brother are rescued. Both women are orphans, and, like Marian, Hadley is brought up by her well-meaning but feckless uncle, Mitch; Marian's uncle Wallace tries his best to be a good father figure, but becomes an alcoholic.

Marriages of convenience also appear in both narratives. Hadley has been married to a fellow actor, and, from the outside, their marriage is utterly perfect. Yet, it falls apart, and the world is shocked when the couple separates. This resonates with Ruth and Eddie's marriage, which is a marriage of convenience covering up the fact that they are both gay. Again, society makes assumptions, and – in Hadley's case – is unhappy when those assumptions are challenged.

Marian and Hadley are also both women who experience a series of problematic or non-normative romantic relationships. As a young girl, Marian's relationship with Caleb is initially somewhat predatory on Caleb's part, and Marian's relationship with Barclay Macqueen becomes abusive. Hadley has an affair with Alexei, a married man, which causes them both intense anxiety

The film *Peregrine* links Hadley and Marian most of all. Hadley takes on the role of Marian as a way to repair her career and do a 'serious' film, not expecting that she will become so fascinated with Marian's life.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Maggie Shipstead is the New York Times bestselling author of the novels *Astonish Me* and *Seating Arrangements*, winner of the Dylan Thomas Prize and the L.A. Times Book Prize for First Fiction. *Great Circle* is her third novel and was seven years in the writing. She is a graduate of Harvard and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, a former Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford, and the recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Ruth says, 'There's always been girls like us hidden in the nooks and crannies', meaning that being a lesbian, at that time in history, went largely under society's radar – not because it was approved of, but because, as Ruth says, 'it's expected that girls like men'. Indeed, even though Ruth and Marian look nothing alike, people interpret their closeness as sisterly rather than as lovers.

Marian follows this line of Ruth's with, "'I don't know exactly what kind of girl I am,'" Marian said. She had trouble with that word, girl, but woman didn't feel quite right either, applied to herself. Being a woman seemed to suggest a person who owned baking pans and a string of pearls.'

Marian is a woman who lives life on her own terms at a time when doing so risked considerable consequences. There were probably many women in the 1940s and

1950s who felt as she does about the gender norms and prescribed sexual orientation of her time. However, few women would have had the economic power and personal freedom to do much about it.

In the present day, Hadley has economic freedom and a certain amount of power as a famous actress, but her image is carefully curated, and her whole career is threatened by one kiss with 'the wrong man'. The expectations that the world has of Hadley are, perhaps, almost as rigid as they are for Ruth and Marian many years prior.

How does Maggie Shipstead show us how women have 'hidden in the nooks and crannies'?

What happens to women when they refuse to hide?

QUESTIONS

What does the story of Sitting-in-the-Water-Grizzly/Gone-to-the-Spirits tell us?

How does World War II affect Marian and Jamie? Is it better for Marian? Why?

Hadley comes to the conclusion that it doesn't matter how much truth there is in the *Peregrine* film. Should films and books based on real-life stories always aim to be entirely truthful?

NEXT STEPS

Throughout *Great Circle*, Shipstead gives us snippets of aviation history including

mentions of American women pilots Amelia Earhart and Elinor Smith, and the English pilot Amy Johnson. Amelia Earhart is described as an uncompromising woman, rather like Marian, who tells her husband upon getting married that she will need to be away for long periods of time and that she will also need to be polygamous – what we might today call an 'open marriage'. Research these female pilots' lives. How much did race and class enable them to be pilots in the first place? What challenges did they face? What level of detail can you find about their achievements, in comparison with the volume of information available on their male counterparts?

Alternatively, you could write some missing entries from Marian's log book. What might have happened in the moments that went undocumented? What might Marian's innermost thoughts have been on her perilous flight around the globe?



Great Circle is a wonderful evocation of wanderlust. Marian's adventure around the globe makes for a great read.'

Anita Sethi, 2022 Judge



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

Seating Arrangements by Maggie Shipstead explores the dynamics of a wealthy white American family as they gather for a wedding.

The Night Watch by Sarah Waters follows four characters navigating relationships, danger and heroism in World War II London.



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?