

## ***Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk. 2007. Published in translation 2018.**

Notes for Book Club meeting “Beyond Borders”

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Olga Tokarczuk was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2019. Among her works translated into English are *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (published in Polish in 2009, and in English 2018). *Flights* was published in Polish in 2007, and the English translation by Jennifer Croft won the Man Booker Prize in 2018.

*Flights* offers different writing styles and perspectives. It is loosely organized as a record of the principal narrator’s “pilgrimage” in which she travels, mostly by air, between locations with notable museum collections of preserved human and animal bodies and body parts. This interest also drives some of the novel’s extended pieces of historical fiction, including the story of Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731) a pioneer in the craft of preservation. The writer paints word-pictures, some of explicitly evoke period paintings (for example, p.215 includes a description of “The Anatomy Lesson” painted by Adriaen Backer in 1670.

The novel also includes extended encounters with a range of contemporary, fictional characters – Kunicki, a Polish husband whose wife and child leave him for a few days during a vacation on an Adriatic island (pp.24-51, and pp.330-359); Eryk, a career sailor whose experience includes a period of imprisonment, during which he read and absorbed the novel *Moby Dick* (pp. 80-96); Blau, a contemporary scientist of preservation (pp.126-164); and Annushka, a Russian mother who flees her life (pp.227-260).

Bulgarian author and critic Kapka Kassabova calls the book “... a passionate and enchantingly discursive plea for meaningful connectedness, for the acceptance of “fluidity, mobility, illusoriness.” <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/flights-by-olga-tokarczuk-review>

Kassabova read the book in Bulgarian translation, which preserved the Polish title – *Bieguni*, meaning “Wanderers” or “Runaways”—which fits especially the stories of Kunicki’s wife, Eryk and Annushka. How does it fit Blau, Kunicki, Ruysch or other characters?

**One way to read the novel** is as a meditation on attempts to secure permanence, in the face of the fleeting and the transitory nature of life. The narrator seems to embrace the latter as a mode of being. This is the reading offered by another reviewer in the New Yorker, who observes it romanticizes displacement, in a way that subsequent refugee crises and border anxieties challenge. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/flights-a-novel-that-never-settles-down>

**Some of the ideas or phrases** (in Jennifer Croft’s fluent translation) that stuck with me.

- The enduring power of *Moby Dick*, (p.72, and throughout Eryk’s story) combined with repeated references to whales (in the newspaper Annushka reads on p.251, and the micro-story, which ends with a gut punch, on pp.270-272).
- The anti-authoritarian, creative force of movement (258-260)
- P.8 “I actually buy my books in paperback, so that I can leave them without remorse on the platform, for someone else to find. I don’t collect anything.”
- P.270 “Each of my pilgrimages aims at some other pilgrim.”

## IMAGES THAT PERHAPS FIRED CAPTURED OLGA TOCARCZUK'S IMAGINATION



*The Anatomical Lesson of Professor Frederick Ruysch by Adriaen Becker (1670)*



*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederick Ruysch by [Jan van Neck](#) (1683)*



An illustration of one of Frederick Ruysch's dioramas, with fetal skeletons weeping into handkerchiefs. At <https://history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/peter-the-great-cabinet-curiosity.htm>