

# 'In Ascension', by Martin MacInnes

Review by Martyn Colebrook



Despite my anticipation after reading his previous novels, Martin MacInnes's third novel, *In Ascension*, left me astounded. It's a bold claim to make this early on in his career but I genuinely think Martin MacInnes may well be one of the most talented novelists of his generation. Had he been a year younger his presence on the Granta Young British Novelists 2023 would surely have been guaranteed, and his shortlisting for the Booker Prize 2023 is a reflection of the quality that exudes from this work of fiction.

There is a fascination with connected mysteries in MacInnes's work - *Infinite Ground* (2016) sees a man leave a family dinner and disappear and the detective who is brought in to investigate finds the makings of the solution in the Amazon Rainforest whilst he must overcome a faceless entity known only as The Corporation. His second novel, *Gathering Evidence* (2020), is a near-future dystopia in which social media tech 'The Nest' is omnipresent in the lives of its users and this is juxtaposed with the study of a near-extinct animal species in a jungle sanctuary. Such range and the ability to synthesise data points which present as fundamentally disaggregated reminds me of the American novelist Richard Powers and I would be surprised if there is not a mutual awareness of their respective fiction.

Turning to *In Ascension* (2023), MacInnes maintains the thematic concern of the environment which has come to underpin his novels to date. The reader is introduced to Dr Leigh Hasenboch, a child who grew up in Rotterdam and for whom the marine world and the Waterfront area of the city is a refuge. It represents an escape from her father Geert, an engineer for the Water Board who possesses a volcanic temper, and a traumatic, challenging relationship with her mother. We are also introduced here to Leigh's sister, Helena, a quieter and more introspective individual and the tension between the more career-driven and aspirational Leigh and Helena, who feels compelled to remain as a carer by proxy for their mother who is slowly slipping into a state of mental decay, runs throughout the novel and acts as a useful contrast with the more global issues with which MacInnes engages.

Leigh's career as a marine biologist takes her to the floor of the Atlantic Ocean as she works on a vessel named the Endeavour which is tasked with charting the activity it discovers. One such discovery is a vent which has appeared in the earth's crust that, unfathomably, is stated to be roughly three times the depth of the Mariana Trench. As the scientists on the boat are exposed to the vent they suffer sickness, the light emissions appear hallucinatory and Leigh experiences a sensation which compares only with the sublime. This eerie and supernatural phenomenon compounds their sense of disbelief when it produces readings of a potential depth that appears to have more in common with corrupted data and electronics than an entity that could actually be achievable.

Moving away from the depths of the ocean, the plot then soars into the far reaches of space when a second mystery is thrown into the pot. Astronomers discover an anomalous, miles-wide and unidentifiable object moving through the solar system and initially predicted to collide with earth. With no warning the object changes course and disappears in the Oort cloud, thus presenting a second opportunity for Leigh to venture forth into hitherto unexplored areas beyond our comprehension but within the realms of scientific possibility.

The tenderness of the relationship between Leigh and her sister is particularly demonstrated through the ethical dilemma and frustration that their calls present. Unable to reveal information about her work due to confidentiality clauses, Leigh must reconcile this with the demands and overt disapproval she receives from Helena for prioritising career over family. The use of 'tenderness' is a conscious choice since the reader can see there is a desire and willingness to foster a

harmonious relationship in Leigh's words and observations but her sister's own raw and sensitive responses to such a complex and personal situation make for a number of tense but brilliantly drawn out exchanges.

Not content with two plotlines which take the reader to the extremes, MacInnes then draws together his concluding sequence of events in a manner which appears to compress a significant amount of activity into a short space of text yet at no point feels rushed or clumsy. Having coaxed the reader into the complexities of *In Ascension* from the first page, he accelerates with such finesse that you barely realise the manner in which the plot has developed. Such control and confidence when it comes to executing a novel of this size and scope may well be the most evident mark of a novelist who is very much in the ascendancy.

With language that invites such lucid and atmospheric imagination, and the ability to convey events which give the appearance of being true or lifelike, there is an intense engagement with the intimacies of human life. Whether this is through the microcosms of highly restrictive spaces such as a space shuttle or the macrocosms of a fragile and newly discovered ecosystem, it remains one which is self-perpetuating yet remarkably vulnerable to the unwitting vagaries of Leigh's world and the citizens within.

*In Ascension* is published by Atlantic Books



Despite my anticipation after reading his previous novels, Martin MacInnes's third novel, *In Ascension*, left me astounded. It's a bold claim to make this early on in his career but I genuinely think Martin MacInnes may well be one of the most talented novelists of his generation. Had he been a year younger his

presence on the Granta Young British Novelists 2023 would surely have been guaranteed, and his shortlisting for the Booker Prize 2023 is a reflection of the quality that exudes from this work of fiction.

There is a fascination with connected mysteries in MacInnes's work - *Infinite Ground* (2016) sees a man leave a family dinner and disappear and the detective who is brought in to investigate finds the makings of the solution in the Amazon Rainforest whilst he must overcome a faceless entity known only as The Corporation. His second novel, *Gathering Evidence* (2020), is a near-future dystopia in which social media tech 'The Nest' is omnipresent in the lives of its users and this is juxtaposed with the study of a near-extinct animal species in a jungle sanctuary. Such range and the ability to synthesise data points which present as fundamentally disaggregated reminds me of the American novelist Richard Powers and I would be surprised if there is not a mutual awareness of their respective fiction.

Turning to *In Ascension* (2023), MacInnes maintains the thematic concern of the environment which has come to underpin his novels to date. The reader is introduced to Dr Leigh Hasenboch, a child who grew up in Rotterdam and for whom the marine world and the Waterfront area of the city is a refuge. It represents an escape from her father Geert, an engineer for the Water Board who possesses a volcanic temper, and a traumatic, challenging relationship with her mother. We are also introduced here to Leigh's sister, Helena, a quieter and more introspective individual and the tension between the more career-driven and aspirational Leigh and Helena, who feels compelled to remain as a carer by proxy for their mother who is slowly slipping into a state of mental decay, runs throughout the novel and acts as a useful contrast with the more global issues with which MacInnes engages.

Leigh's career as a marine biologist takes her to the floor of the Atlantic Ocean as she works on a vessel named the Endeavour which is tasked with charting the activity it discovers. One such discovery is a vent which has appeared in the earth's crust that, unfathomably, is stated to be roughly three times the depth of the Mariana Trench. As the scientists on the boat are exposed to the vent they suffer sickness, the light emissions appear hallucinatory and Leigh experiences a sensation which compares only with the sublime. This eerie and supernatural phenomenon compounds their sense of disbelief when it produces readings of a potential depth that appears to have more in common with corrupted data and

electronics than an entity that could actually be achievable.

Moving away from the depths of the ocean, the plot then soars into the far reaches of space when a second mystery is thrown into the pot. Astronomers discover an anomalous, miles-wide and unidentifiable object moving through the solar system and initially predicted to collide with earth. With no warning the object changes course and disappears in the Oort cloud, thus presenting a second opportunity for Leigh to venture forth into hitherto unexplored areas beyond our comprehension but within the realms of scientific possibility.

The tenderness of the relationship between Leigh and her sister is particularly demonstrated through the ethical dilemma and frustration that their calls present. Unable to reveal information about her work due to confidentiality clauses, Leigh must reconcile this with the demands and overt disapproval she receives from Helena for prioritising career over family. The use of 'tenderness' is a conscious choice since the reader can see there is a desire and willingness to foster a harmonious relationship in Leigh's words and observations but her sister's own raw and sensitive responses to such a complex and personal situation make for a number of tense but brilliantly drawn out exchanges.

Not content with two plotlines which take the reader to the extremes, MacInnes then draws together his concluding sequence of events in a manner which appears to compress a significant amount of activity into a short space of text yet at no point feels rushed or clumsy. Having coaxed the reader into the complexities of *In Ascension* from the first page, he accelerates with such finesse that you barely realise the manner in which the plot has developed. Such control and confidence when it comes to executing a novel of this size and scope may well be the most evident mark of a novelist who is very much in the ascendancy.

With language that invites such lucid and atmospheric imagination, and the ability to convey events which give the appearance of being true or lifelike, there is an intense engagement with the intimacies of human life. Whether this is through the microcosms of highly restrictive spaces such as a space shuttle or the macrocosms of a fragile and newly discovered ecosystem, it remains one which is self-perpetuating yet remarkably vulnerable to the unwitting vagaries of Leigh's world and the citizens within.

*In Ascension* is published by Atlantic Books

---

*(c) The Bottle Imp*