



## The Outlook for Earthlings

**Joan Frank**

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Next to dazzling, bohemian Scarlet, self-effacing Mel seems circumspect. In the episodic vignettes of Joan Frank's painstaking character study, *The Outlook for Earthlings*, the two friends' lives are traced across decades with solemn hindsight and silent criticisms.

As a high schooler, Mel believed herself to be unbeautiful and strapped with a "meagerness of mind." She took conventional paths through an unsatisfying marriage and divorce, with her daughter, Sonia, as her main saving grace. Scarlet wound up working and lonely in California, her reality less glamorous than her personality once hinted she might expect.

After a resurgence of breast cancer, Mel reconnects with Scarlet and reveals her longstanding affair with a married professor. His self-aggrandizing and apparent meanness are off-putting to Scarlet. Mel's loyalty seems slavish, but Scarlet admits that she could be wrong. In time, she accepts that other people's relationships are more complex than outsiders can surmise.

Frank's novel explores the excuses women make to explain the men in their lives; impressions that confirm and sometimes betray truths; and a mystifying friendship between women whose mindsets seem opposed, but who, beneath their pettier judgments, feel attached to one another. Scarlet's need to see Mel as her counterpart is intriguing and honest.

Spanning the sixties through the aughts, with an epilogue set in 2013, the book zigzags through meetings, a Paris trip, emails, and late stage cancer treatments. Mel and Scarlet emerge as adults who've long passed the point of contemplating what-ifs, but who can't help weighing every nuance of their exchanges.

The realization that friendship, in its purest distillation, is about support, no matter people's personal decisions, arrives late, but it's a rending lesson that lingers. With technicolor period details, intense reflections, and devastating acuity about women's compromises in love, *The Outlook for Earthlings* is an elegant elegy.

KAREN RIGBY (September / October 2020)

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