

The Mara Crossing by Ruth Padel.
Chatto and Windus 2012.

The over-riding theme of Ruth Padel's lyrical new book is movement, movement of people and animals, movement of choice and movement of necessity, movement for food and movement for survival.

Mara Crossing is sub-divided into eleven sections: Migration Made the World; Go and Stay; Go and Come Back; Finding the Way; The Hostile Planet: Sky, Sea, Land; There is Always a River; History's Push and Pull; Strangers; The Broken Mirror; Children of Storm; The Wanderings of Psyche. Each section commences with a prose piece which sets out the themes on which the subsequent poems riff, and Ruth Padel interlinks the personal and the general in these introductions so that she is always present in the text, but never obtrusively; one gains a sense, as in her other books, of a fine and incredibly subtle observer whose use of language is never less than excellent and sometimes breath-taking.

Any collection of poems will have its subjective choice of the 'best', dictated not by the author's work but the reader's interests, but there is a cornucopia of riches here which makes such a choice a real challenge. My favourite section is There is Always a River, when she makes the great migration across the Serengeti and the Mara River, observed so many times in natural history documentaries, come alive through words rather than images; but my favourite poem of all, which is quite superb, comes in the section entitled Finding the Way, and is called, simply, The Hummingbird.

The Mara Crossing is a work of complete beauty from a poet who just gets better and better.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh