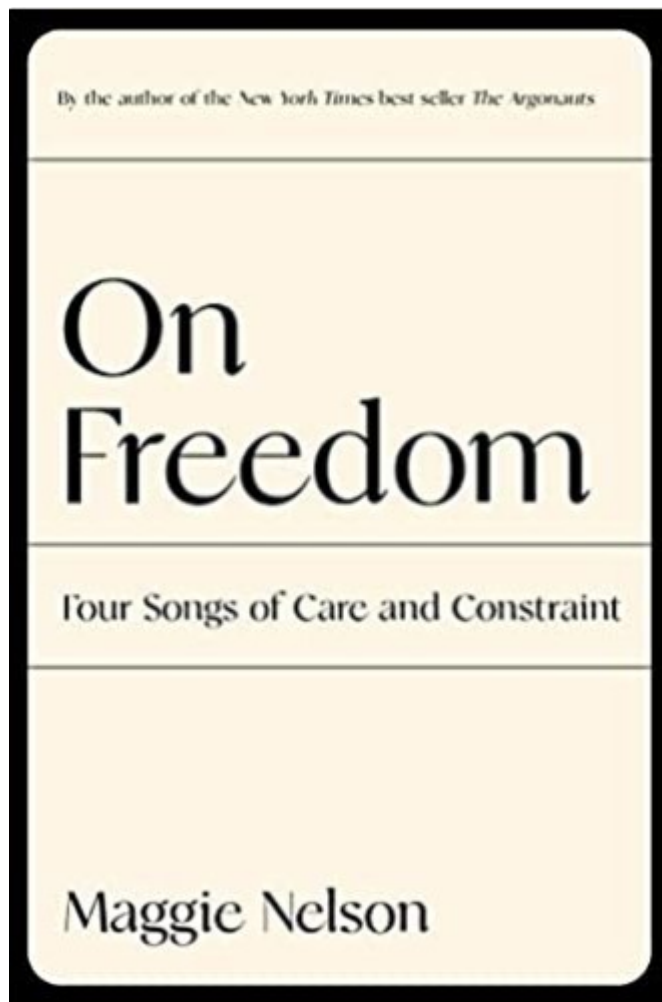


Maggie Nelson finds freedom in the emphatic middle

Her new essay collection examines how Americans thread the needle between care and constraint.

by [Richard Rosengarten](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue

In Review



On Freedom

Four Songs of Care and Constraint

By Maggie Nelson

Graywolf Press

[Buy from Bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org) >

Proposals for an emphatic middle in our political and theological discourse tend to come from conservatives or liberals who feel squeezed. Maggie Nelson has no wish to leave her post on the radical left but nonetheless wishes to articulate an emphatic middle that she and others, right and left, can acknowledge.

Readers of Nelson's work—she is best known for *The Argonauts*, but there is a lot more, and all of it is worth your time—will find here her signature elements: the intimacy and candor of voice, the range of references known and unknown, the insistent attention to the contexts in which she is writing, the always lucid and often lyrical prose. Yet this book differs from its predecessors in that it is more explicitly diagnostic of our particular moment. Written in the time of Donald Trump's presidency by an unabashed and unapologetic leftist, *On Freedom* is an anatomy lesson concerning contemporary American valuations of freedom.

Nelson argues that the middle requires citizens who can recognize both freedom's uses for hegemony and its genuine possibilities for a rich common life. Hence the subtitle: for Nelson, freedom bespeaks a past, a present, and a future marked at once by the hegemony of constraint and the freedom to care. Her emphatic middle refuses to emphasize one part at the expense of the other. To deny, for example, that slavery was, is, and remains a basic inflection point of American life is occasionally misguided and often malicious; to conclude that this fact simply and decisively forecloses possibilities for a better future is an unacceptable counsel to endless despair. Undergirding both this power and its limit is the chimera of "absolute freedom," a phrase that Nelson more than once finds wanting.

On Freedom is thus (purposely) resistant to categorization. Opening with a lucid statement of this theme, the bulk of the book delves into four strata of contemporary life on our planet: art, sex, drugs, and climate. Nelson seeks to limn fundamental recognitions easily lost in our cultural strife.

Chief among these is her salient reminder that art, sex, drugs, and climate matter to human beings irrespective of considerations that too often sort us into opposing

camps, such as gender and politics. (More on religion later.) As always with Nelson, the predominant affect is one of acknowledgment rather than identification: the reader doesn't have to agree with all that Nelson says to recognize that the world she describes is the world in which we too reside. So we understand and share part of what it is to be her, even as Nelson herself evinces levels of interest and efforts to understand those with whom she takes issue. She writes unmistakably and unapologetically from the perspective of a woman married to a person of fluid gender with whom she is raising Iggy (who, significantly, is "already and forthcoming," per the book's dedication).

Nelson's discussions of her four topics are wide-ranging and nuanced, and the reviewer must murder to dissect. The making of art is for Nelson suffused with evidence of care, while its censorship bespeaks constraint; Nelson sees this at play in both the politics of artistic production and the propensity to affix identities to artists (Langston Hughes or Ralph Ellison as "Black writers" rather than "writers"). That art will inevitably be political should not mandate the reduction of works of art to their politics. Here social constraint veers dangerously close to eclipsing the freedom to care. For Nelson, sex is largely erotic drive, at once joyful and celebratory and, yes, coercive. The key is that the dividing lines are not so readily drawn as our myths imply. Sexual freedom always already enacts the care/constraint dynamic. We are naive when we think otherwise.

Nelson's songs on drugs and the climate shift her emphasis from the individual experience to the social and the corporate. This is most acutely so in her song on the climate, which brings into play Iggy's fascination with steam engines to underscore that we inherit circumstances with which we must cope. On Nelson's account we are free in the way that Greek tragic heroes are free—subject chiefly to the will of capricious gods who delimit the range of our capacity to act.

Nelson's emphatic middle emerges as the recognition that to live freely means to live toward an ideal that we must move toward while simultaneously discarding the presumption that its realization will happen and will be happy. Being careful about what we wish for thus has a dual meaning for Nelson: ideals are crucial for right action in the world, but their literalization means their betrayal. What should draw right and left toward the middle is the sharing of this dual recognition.

Readers of Reinhold Niebuhr will hear echoes in parts of this. So far as I can see, Nelson hasn't read Niebuhr—and my best guess is that if she did, she would be wary

of his specific emphases on sin and mercy. On her (too-brief) account, too many of the pitfalls that ambiguate formulations of freedom toward hegemony come from the likes of Paul of Tarsus and his later followers. A better parallel from the Christian canon might be Ralph Waldo Emerson's disenchantment with institutional Christianity and his commitment to remaking one's religion every day. (I suspect that Nelson would love Emerson's remark, when asked what he thought about heaven: "Let us say that no one will be disappointed.")

Nelson is interested in religion, and her controlling tradition is Buddhism. Perhaps the most apposite summary of her argument concerns

what some Buddhists call "the trick of choicelessness." Most religions have something of this trick embedded within them—a sense that, once you've glimpsed or opened to grace, or radical honesty or the noble path or God's will or basic sanity, or what have you, the choice has already been made. . . . [This] doesn't mean that freedom is mythological, that it doesn't exist. Rather . . . it's accessed . . . by radical acceptance, which includes a species of hopelessness.

Within that acceptance is our care, and from that hopelessness is our constraint. Nelson's emphatic middle is this balancing act.