Susan M. Gaines’ *Accidentals* meaningfully explores the sheer contingency of human and animal life, our accidental existence that is inevitably bound to political, biological, and economic forces that supersede all of us. The term *accidental*, used in the context of birdwatching, refers to vagrant animals that wander outside of their species’ normal habitat range. Like the vagrant birds who may have “gotten lost” and are discovered in this story, the novel’s protagonist and amateur birder, Gabriel Quiroga, finds himself wandering out of range of his native Northern California when he accompanies his mother, Lily, to the rural outskirts of Montevideo, Uruguay, to help her move back to her hometown and set up ecologically viable retired life there. While Gabriel does not intend to stay for long, his plans change when he meets the brilliant Alejandra, a biologist who accompanies him on his birding adventures.

Narrated by Gabriel, who is in his early 20s, the novel is set at the turn of the twenty-first century, in 1999, and it looks forward to a pivotal election that reminds Uruguay’s denizens of an intense period of civil unrest decades before. Political divisions – and attitudes towards economics (or, ideologies) – are rife within the Quiroga family itself. While Lili wants to clean up the farm for ecologically sound subsistence living, her brother Juan Luis wants to make it economically viable for growing and selling produce. Rubén, haunted by having been persecuted in Uruguay’s Cold-War past, has only recently returned home. Lurking in the background is deep political trauma and even stories of torture and death. And this political story impacts Alejandra and Gabriel’s relationship in haunting ways.
Accidentals is also a romance; it’s a love story about a last naturalist and
a terrorist’s daughter who gradually discover together the chilling secret of
their political and biological inheritance. Like Gabriel’s drawings of birds,
which are better than photographs because they “highlighted a species
character rather than capturing just one moment in an individual bird’s
life,” the novel captures the character of the turn of the last century
better than a history book, a science textbook, a work of in-depth
journalism, an economic report, or a political manifesto by drawing readers
into a compelling love story. This work of fiction, in effect, calls
attention to the importance of human stories for imagining a collective
future. Facts may collectively persuade, but fiction reminds us of how we are
connected. Fiction helps us to make the connection that perpetually threatens
to break when one takes the longer view of history.

We need more stories that capture the liminality of human experience –
between languages, national histories, economic conditions, and so on. We
need them just as much as we need stories about animals and ecosystems in
similar predicaments owing to decisions that are made beyond the wishes or
intentions of any single individual. Our embeddedness in ideological
ecosystems, the novel shows us, limits what we are able to achieve
collectively. But occasionally, the accidental or outlier emerges to expose
this embeddedness for what it is. If there is hope, it might be in the
embracing of the uncertain future with this in mind – of the way we are all
bound to each other, and the way these intersecting forces make us who we
are. The novel thus adds another layer to Gaines’s ecologically conscious and
increasingly relevant Carbon Dreams (2001), which gestures toward the need to
act collectively in light of what science tells us about how human political
and economic decisions affect the world around us. Accidentals points us to
the way we are deeply entangled, even when we have stopped seeing this
entanglement for what it is.
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