



The Woman Next Door

Liz Byrski

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Over the years, the residents of Emerald Street have become more than just neighbours, they have built lasting friendships over a drink and chat on their back verandahs.

Now a new chapter begins with the children having left home. Helen and Dennis have moved from their high maintenance family property to an apartment by the river with all the mod cons. For Joyce and Mac, the empty nest has Joyce craving a new challenge, while Mac fancies retirement on the south coast. Meanwhile, Polly embarks on a surprising long-distance relationship. But she worries about her friend next door. Stella's erratic behaviour is starting to resemble something much more serious than endearing eccentricity...

With her trademark warmth and wisdom, Liz Byrski involves us in the lives and loves of Emerald Street, and reminds us what it is to be truly neighbourly.

The Woman Next Door Details

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From Reader Review The Woman Next Door for online ebook

Susan Dawson says

Took me a while to get into it but really enjoyed it once I got going!!! Lovely different story from my usual romance and I loved it!!!! The woman in this story so make it wonderful - thanks LB. our female friendship span generations and map our lives. Xx

Liz says

Liz Byrski writes mainly about older women in contemporary settings, an almost untapped market that appeals to a lot of readers. The fact this book is set in my neighbourhood, Perth & Fremantle it was like putting on a pair of comfy slippers, a book I could visualise at every turn.

As the title suggests it is a novel involving neighbours. After years of living on Emerald Street the characters are like family, they are a close knit community caring for each other as a new phase in life begins. All their children have left home & it's a time of change. Helen & Dennis have recently left the street to live in a luxury apartment, low maintenance, overlooking the river. Joyce & Mac have differing opinions about what they want to do, Mac wants to retire to their holiday home in Albany whilst Joyce craves to be useful & use her finally free time. She wants to learn to teach English to migrants, & so they embark on a period of living apart to achieve their goals. Single Polly embarks on a long distance relationship with Leo, a man none of the friends can warm to, whilst she worries about Stella next door, slightly older than the rest of them, whose behaviour is becoming more & more erratic.

This is an easy read, a character based novel exploring the complexities of ageing & the changes it brings. There were a few unexpected elements in the book, one tragic & one joyful which brought light & hope for the future. Liz Byrski fills a gap in the market with down to earth, readable books for an older age group.

Lizzy Chandler says

This is the second book by Liz Byrski I've read. The first, *In the Company of Strangers*, introduced me to two women who share a history as child migrants from the UK who settled in Western Australia. "Friends in Western Australia" may be a niche Byrski has carved for herself, because *The Woman Next Door* also follows this pattern. This time the focus is on Emerald Street and the neighbours, Joyce, Helen, Polly and Stella, who have been in and out of each other's houses over a lifetime, from raising their children and pursuing their careers, to battling ill health and coming to terms with ageing, death and loss. The losses are many, including strains on marriages and on friendships.

In simple language, in a narrative where not much happens, apart from the ups and downs of daily life as the neighbours make decisions that impact on themselves and their friends, Byrski creates a powerfully emotional story. For me, the emotional core of the story comes from the friendship between two of the single characters, Polly and Stella. Polly is a writer, and her nearest and dearest neighbour is the elderly Stella Lamont, stage name of a soapie star who is showing signs of dementia. Through the course of the novel we

see them as mother, sister, daughter, confidante, adviser and carer to each other - so much more than just neighbours. It is a moving portrait of a type of love that the Ancient Greeks called "philia", or deep friendship, and in the end brought me to tears.

As I looked up "philia" to check I was using the term correctly, I realised the novel also paints a portrait of three other types of love, as the Greeks termed them: "pragma" or enduring love, shared by the married couple, Joyce and her husband Mac; "agape", or love of all humanity, which Joyce displays when, after successfully fulfilling the roles of wife and mother, she establishes a late career as a volunteer teacher of English to refugees; and "philautia", or self love, which provides one of the central conflicts of the novel (which I won't elaborate on for fear of spoilers). Each of these portraits is moving in its own way and strikes me as being both psychologically and emotionally "true".

Liz Byrski is the author of eight novels and several nonfiction books. She has a PhD in writing from Curtin University and is Director of the China Australia Writing Centre. It's good to know she has a backlist of books to be explored. *The Woman Next Door* is highly recommended.

Dale Harcombe says

Four and a half stars

Emerald Street Fremantle, Western Australia has been home to a group of people who become more than just neighbours. They are friends and have been for years until things change. First Helen and Dennis move away to an apartment. The friendship with Joyce and Mac has never been the same since then. But when Joyce and Mac announce their plans to live apart for a time while each pursues their own dreams, the friendship between Joyce and Helen hits more than just a road block. Meanwhile another friend and neighbour Stella is, at eighty, returning to her acting career after having retired twice before. But this time she is not finding it as easy remembering her lines. Her next door neighbour and friend Polly, is concerned there is more going on than just forgetting a few lines. How can she best help? Polly who looks on Stella as almost a mother figure is torn between trying to care for Stela while at the same time maintaining a long distance relationship with her new love Leo.

I like the fact that Liz Byrski writes about older people, people who have had lots of life experience. In their own way, each of these characters is trying to come to terms with the process of aging and all it entails. It was easy to relate to the characters although I found it a bit sad too. Both the setting and the characters are well drawn. I admit to being a big fan of Liz Byrski's books and this was no exception, though I could have done without some of the language. Leo is a pompous pratt. When he used the f word in relation to Australia I audibly said, 'Good riddance to you,' which produced an amused look for my husband. However it probably gives you some idea that I was emotionally involved with the characters in this novel. Right from the beginning I found Polly extremely gullible and couldn't see what she saw in Leo.

There were moments of anger and tears but also lovely moments shared with these characters. I particularly liked the friendship between Mac and Dennis and how differently men relate in their friendships to women. This is a story of ordinary people dealing with relationships, friendships, caring for others, guilt, aging and loss. It was a book that I started and just wanted to keep reading till I finished. I was up till 2.15 am reading this one till we had a blackout. I couldn't wait to finish it off the next morning .

Brenda says

Emerald Street in Fremantle, Western Australia housed people who started off as neighbours but had found lasting friendships. With Joyce and Mac, Helen and Dennis, Stella, and of course Polly, the friendships were deep and abiding. When Helen and Dennis sold their home in Emerald Street, moving to an apartment further away, things began to shift in the relationships.

Stella had been an actress in the soaps – nearing eighty she was starting to become forgetful which was worrying her friends. Mac and Joyce decided to have a year apart – Mac would go to their cottage in Albany to do the “man thing” while Joyce would do something for herself. Meanwhile Polly in her overseas travels would meet a man who stirred her senses.

Slowly Stella’s behaviour worsened; the friends became increasingly worried about her, but tried to keep their concern from Stella. Joyce found an innate strength she didn’t know she had, while Mac gained Charlie, his delightfully friendly golden retriever. And Polly travelled to London, Paris and Bali...

The Woman Next Door by Aussie author Liz Byrski is a wonderfully warm and emotional story about lasting friendships and love. Starting as young families with their children; learning to like and then love their neighbours, then evolving to include their grandchildren. The friends cared for one another, watched out for each other, as well as the occasional sharing of a bottle of wine or a cup of tea and laughter on the verandah of their homes. Emerald Street was one such street, but there would be others the same the world over. I thoroughly enjoyed *The Woman Next Door* and have no hesitation in recommending it highly.

With thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for this copy to read in exchange for my honest review.

Tanya says

In the interest of full disclosure, I wouldn't have bought this book. My Mum did, read it, and had no room for it in her house (they downsized in retirement) so gave it to me. I have this thing about reading a book though before it has a home here, so it sat on the TBR pile until, in all honesty, I had nothing else to read.

So imagine my surprise when I actually began to enjoy it! I can definitely see why Liz Byrski is a much loved author.

Joyce and Mac, Helen and Dennis, Polly, Stella have been neighbours on Emerald St for decades. They are aging, settling into retirement, and so their lives and friendships take on a different turn.

It took a few chapters, but once I was immersed in this story I really enjoyed it, being a West Australian native, I loved that there were locations I recognised. Beyond that, although the characters were dealing with retirement issues, really, don't we all go through stages regardless of age where we feel out of touch with life and those around us? Where we are trying to figure out our place in the world? Maybe it's just my specific circumstances, but I could really understand a lot of the issues dealt with in this book.

Kathryn says

4.5★ I do really enjoy Liz Byrski's writing. The main subject matter of this book was not an easy one - watching a loved one decline into dementia is an awful experience. But the characters in this book tackle the hard tasks involved with great sensitivity. The sub-plots are also difficult ones, involving a manipulative relationship, and a marriage breakdown along with the breakup of long-standing friendships, with there being one twist about halfway through that I certainly didn't see coming!!

I felt that it was all well-resolved at the end, with some bitter-sweetness to finish it off.

Marianne says

The Woman Next Door is the ninth novel by British-born Australian author, Liz Byrski. It has been many years since the women who call Emerald Street in South Fremantle home became friends as well as neighbours. While Joyce, Stella and Polly all still live next-door to each other, Helen has moved away, but stays in regular contact with her erstwhile neighbours.

Joyce and Mac are empty nesters, their adult children living across the country and across the globe, with their own families and careers; Stella is an ageing and rather eccentric actress who has been recalled yet again from retirement to reprise her much loved role in a very popular TV soap opera.

Polly is a writer whose research frequently takes her overseas, with detours via Bali to visit her brother Alistair and his partner Steve; with their sons making their own lives away from home, Helen and Dennis had taken the opportunity to sell up and leave Emerald Street for the dream apartment in North Fremantle that Helen has always wanted.

Whilst at a conference in Edinburgh, Polly meets the charming but narcissistic Leo; Joyce and Mac decide to spend a year apart to pursue their differing interests; Stella's latest acting stint reveals the onset of dementia; and Helen's unhappiness manifests in increasingly inflammatory remarks. None of them can imagine the depth of change that will be wrought in their lives over the next eighteen months

As always, Byrski expertly conveys her setting: readers even vaguely acquainted with contemporary Perth will recognise it easily, and her descriptions of overseas locations is equally well rendered; her characters, too, are familiar, and most are appealing; their dialogue can be overheard in any backyard or café.

This is a book that will appeal to a broad readership, but will resonate particularly with mature readers who are facing the sorts of issues that Byrski touches on: the approach of dementia in friends and family; the death of contemporaries; the search for fulfilment in later life; the burden of caring for the elderly and infirm.

Topical and age-old themes are also touched upon: the plight of refugees; loyalty, infidelity, deception, men's sheds, twins and long-distance relationships. Once again, Byrski gives the reader a brilliant "hen lit" (as opposed to chick lit) book that is an enjoyable and very moving read.

Janine says

Another great book by Liz Byrski. I love how she writes about people and situations that I can relate to.

Michelle Parsons says

Liz Byrski is such a wonderful storyteller. Her endearing characters often become people whom you wished you lived next door to. I loved *A Month of Sundays* and was excited to delve into the pages of another of her novels and *The Woman Next Door* didn't disappoint. Now to work my way through her back catalogue ?

Carinya Kappler says

Liz Byrski creates a feel-good warmth in her fiction by her creation of the type of street community most people would love to be a part of. Her depiction of Emerald Street and its occupants could occur in any friendly town or suburb in Australia.

Relationships develop in this book between neighbours that are literally life changing and life long. Polly finds a mother figure in her neighbor Stella and long term friendships become family ties as the younger generation grows up together.

This is a beautifully written novel, well worth reading, full of rounded, but sometimes flawed characters.
Carinya

Fire Crystals says

I didn't like the style of writing employed by the author throughout this book. It somehow felt as though I was an observer of everything going on, instead of being immersed in it, or feeling as though I could be one of those characters.

Subject-wise, the material was quite interesting, about people whose children have flown the coop, are retired and trying to figure what they must do to feel useful and still in control of their lives.

However, the writing style completely put me off, with the story being narrated from different points of view, and also the present tense used throughout the book.

I think the author could have made the story more readable and likeable just by correcting some of these things.

Mack says

A delightful read about empty nests, the uncertainties of growing old without fear and the bonds formed with neighbours on Emerald Street. The life changes that happen for these ageing neighbours reminds me of Mr Darwin to quote: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

Tanya says

Very good book and story. A bit hard for me personally to read, as someone whose mother has dementia. Very well written and accurate portrayal of Stella's demented decline. Very sad to read but excellently done.

The bit where Dorothy explains what is happening to Stella to Polly is heartbreakingly true. Thank you.

"Outside the main entrance Polly pauses, leans against the wall, eyes closed trying to hold back tears and failing miserably.

'Are you all right, Polly?'

She looks up to see Dorothy standing beside her.

'I don't know how to do this,' she says. 'For years we've been so close . . .'

'It's very hard,' Dorothy says, 'but Stella does need to be here. And I promise you this is a good place, Polly. We care for our residents, they become like family to us. Stella will always be treated with respect and kindness. We don't infantilise or patronise.'

'I know, I know, but Stella . . . She should be at home in her own house where she can still feel a bit independent. I've let her down so badly . . .'

'No,' Dorothy insists, 'you've done the right thing, you and your friends all agreed on this when you came to discuss it with us while Stella was still in hospital. Stella is not unhappy. She's well, and comfortable and she does understand that she needs this sort of care. She knows she can't live alone, and she knows she's safe here. You've seen how much the other residents love her. Some of them have been her fans for years. They love having a star in their midst.'

'But that's not the real Stella, the Stella I know.'

Dorothy sighs. 'No, it's not. I understand that and I know it's hard for you, but it's the truth. This is who she is now. You still see the old Stella and you grasp at that but you can't make her come back and you shouldn't try. Every time you argue with her and try to set her right you put her and yourself under pressure. You can't make her remember, you can't force her to have the correct version of things.'

'But I want her to understand,' Polly says. 'She has a right to have the correct information . . . it's a basic human right, isn't it, to make your own decisions, or at least have a say?'

Dorothy grabs Polly's hands and holds them firmly in her own. 'Polly, you are trying to convince yourself that those moments of rationality mean you can force the old Stella back to life. What you have to learn is to accept who she has become, and from now on that's something of a work in progress. If you insist on correcting her, trying to make her understand where she's wrong, you'll spoil your last months or years with her. I know this because I did it with my parents, my father especially. I needed him to be rational, to be in charge as he had always been. I couldn't accept the way he had become and so I fought him over every little illusion or distortion, and all it did was hurt both of us. I spoiled our last months together with my insistence that he should accept what I told him and see that it was right. I hurt him, Polly, and I hurt myself. Each time I corrected him I diminished him – he felt that, very keenly I think. Every time you try to set Stella right you diminish who she is, who she has become.'

'But what can I do?' Polly says, her voice hoarse now. 'I want to do what's best for her, honestly I do.'

'Then learn to love and accept her as she is now, alongside the memory of how she was. Make the decisions for her wellbeing, reassure her, don't try to wring decisions from her or force her to understand. Go along with what she says, it doesn't matter that it's wrong because five minutes later she'll have forgotten it and there'll be something else on her mind.'

'It's so chaotic, Dorothy, it feels like madness . . .'

‘Yes, and if you love her you enter into it with her. Let her have her way if it’s not dangerous to her. Grant her some peace in her confusion and delusion. Because you can’t change this, Polly, it’s not going to get better, you are not going to get the old Stella back. Don’t lock yourself into a battle for her rationality because it’s a battle that is already lost.’”

Pauleen says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book as I do most of Liz Byrski's. This one speaks more to those of us of a certain age though I'd be reluctant to categorise the characters as "old" as she does. This is a novel about ageing: the anxieties, the contrast to an earlier professional life, the way forward to creating a new life, and dealing with the competing "demands" of the elderly above us and the younger generations behind. Leo, one of the key characters, deal with this simply by being narcissistically self-obsessed (a tautology).

The novel also highlights the issues and benefits from living in an engaged community or neighbourhood where care and concern for others is key to one's own life and happiness, as well as sadness. The impact of Alzheimer's and dementia is something many of us all fear having or living with.
