



## The Forrests

*Emily Perkins*

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## **The Forrests** Emily Perkins

Dorothy Forrest is immersed in the sensory world around her; she lives in the flickering moment. From the age of seven, when her odd, disenfranchised family moves from New York City to the wide skies of Auckland, to the very end of her life, this is her great gift and possible misfortune. Through the wilderness of a commune, to falling in love, to early marriage and motherhood, from the glorious anguish of parenting to the loss of everything worked for and the unexpected return of love, Dorothy is swept along by time. Her family looms and recedes; revelations come to light; death changes everything, but somehow life remains as potent as it ever was, and the joy in just being won't let her go.

In a narrative that shifts and moves, growing as wild as the characters, *The Forrests* is an extraordinary literary achievement. A novel that sings with colour and memory, it speaks of family and time, dysfunction, ageing and loneliness, about heat, youth, and how life can change if 'you're lucky enough to be around for it'.

## **The Forrests Details**

Date : Published June 5th 2012 by Bond Street Books (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9780385663731

Author : Emily Perkins

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## From Reader Review The Forrests for online ebook

### Emma Makes says

Another reviewer (one star) on here has written, "You keep waiting for something to happen, but as with most families, nothing does" and that's precisely what makes The Forrests so wonderful.

If The Forrests were a movie, it would be European, not American: the beauty and wonder of this novel isn't in finding a problem to overcome it's in overcoming of ourselves. This is about the extraordinary in the ordinary - genuine, normal people living their lives and encountering each other and themselves.

At the start of the novel the Forrests are full of potential - their family is wonderful, they laugh and play together and have nostalgic memories of sunny days. With their blonde hair and American accents, to outsiders they probably seem like the epitome of perfection.

But as they grow and form their own families they become like everyone else - grinding through the days, questioning of the decisions they've made, nostalgic and ever-returning to what could have been, touched with sadness and not special any more.

This is the first book by Emily Perkins that I've read and I was lucky enough to spend two straight days with The Forrests as I lay flat-out on my back with an injury. Her writing is wonderful; descriptive and rich with the kind of sentences and observations that occasionally had me stopping mid-sentence to admire the words in delight and wonder.

Highly recommended but not to all - I think if you enjoy contemporary and New Zealand Fiction you'll like The Forrests. More so if you enjoyed Rain (Kirsty Gunn) Owls Do Cry (Janet Frame) and A Boy and his Uncle (Anne Kennedy).

Even more so if, like me, your parents just got divorced out of the blue and you looked up from your everyday life and realised you were no longer a special family either.

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### Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

The novel opens in a chaotic jumble -- a staged family film -- that dissolves into mess of wiggling children, animals, snacks, arguments. It's a bit difficult at first to make heads or tails of the story as Perkins literally plunges you into the middle of the Forrest family. Quickly, though, threads emerge: Frank Forrest, an aspiring actor, wants to leave it all and hauls his family from New York to New Zealand but fails in his theatrical endeavors, so the family, stranded now, lives off his trust fund allowance, which isn't enough to bring them back to the States. Lee, his wife, drags her four children and a neighbor's boy with her to a commune, and the story blossoms from there.

The novel follows (mostly) Dot through her life -- from her eight-year old self through to her elderly self, suffering dementia -- and the story she tells is unsurprising, conventional, slow, discomforting, confusing, and bittersweet. And, for me, that's what is so lovely and sad about it.

Honestly, from the first page, this book made me uncomfortable, deeply uncomfortable, but in a good way.

From the first page, I was reminded of a less physically savage, feminine *Mosquito Coast* -- there's no man versus nature versus his own insanity struggle for survival -- but Dot and her family, caught in the whims of their parents -- struggle in their own ways. I wanted to scream at Dot's parents, Dot herself, constantly; I wanted to hug all of them. As the story follows Dot and her siblings, I was reminded of other sparse, uncomfortable coming-of-age novels: *The Virgin Suicides*, Lauren Groff's *Arcadia*,

Perkins writing style is sparse but dreamy; I didn't race through this book but I couldn't put it down. It's hard to get a feel for the characters but that distance feels intentional -- all the characters are struggling to survive, to keep on, to find some measure of happiness without losing themselves -- and it was depressing/amazing to follow them. But I was captured by this tragic, odd, damaged family -- horrified, moved, shocked, sympathetic -- and by the end ... I felt a bit gutted. (Even if the end had enough lift that I actually felt freed!)

If you like moody family sagas, this is your book. Or commune tales. Or so-uncomfortable-you-wiggle coming-of-age stories. If you want to be grateful for your own slightly less messed up childhood, pick this up. Like me, you might be seduced by the Forrests, entranced, mesmerized, and even saddened to finally leave them.

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### **Megan says**

This is an interesting book, which I think is the best of Perkin's novels to date. Don't expect a plot, because the plot is peripheral to the main character, Dorothy, Dottie, Dot depending on when and who are referring to her. I really feel this novel brings to fruition some of the earlier promise in Perkins' writing, particularly in her short stories. The beginning of the book took me back to short stories, such as 'a place where no one knows your face' in *Not Her Real Name*. It conveys a family car journey to the camp ground for their summer holiday. Perkins' ability to zoom in on a moment and to stretch it out to become a story in itself is clearly shown here:

'Your mother passes peaches back from the front seat. You uncross the fingers of your left hand so you can hold the peach. She tells you not to get juice everywhere. You don't see how you're going to be able not to. The peach is over-ripe and squashy and as soon as you bite into it juice dribbles down your chin. It will be sticky later. The squeaking of the furry peach skin gives you shivers. You bite around a bruise. You unwind the window and throw the bruise bit out. It doesn't go out properly and slides down the door of the car. You hope your father didn't see. You stick your face out the window to feel the air rushing over it. You stick your tongue out to be dried by the air and then put it into the peach flesh and feel the peach flesh rushing back into your mouth. Saliva. You hate that word.'

This curious mix of extreme involvement in the moment, and complete detachment from the moment to analyse it so closely is a real feature of Perkins' writing. It is integral to this book. In some ways I didn't get it until I had finished the book. And yet there were clues all the way through. Dot experiences her life, but I'm not completely sure she lives it. Everything happens around Dot, and she has no idea of what is really going on. She watches her family and doesn't really see them. She embeds herself so thoroughly in her experience of the moment, that there is no room for any other experience.

When Grace cries out that her mother (Dot) would laugh at her when she was angry, Dot reflects and remembers that indeed that was so. No interpretation, no thought for the impact beyond herself. Just, yes that was so. Dot is also later surprised to realise how much family knowledge she does not have. Her sister knows

of her youthful adventures. knows her parents, and Dot is taken aback - wondering how she knew.

Dot's life continues and continues and she lives it in each moment of time. We don't really get to make any sense of it, because Dot doesn't really. Everything happens around Dot, and we get occasional glimpses of the plot of her life. That the story is not plot driven is further exacerbated by the fact that we dip in and out of her life at seemingly random moments. Connect the Dots.

To read this book is like lying on the outdoor table, wooden of course, in the sun, and smelling the woodiness and oil, feeling the hot surface on your cheek as it gradually cools and aligns its temperature with your cheek, then feeling the grain of each piece of wood, and the gaps between, and the small spider that travels over your hand, while noticing that the shadow of the grape leaf is wandering gently over the chair back in front of you, but not noticing that everyone else has gone inside for dinner. Gorgeous writing and stunning in its selection of reveal and not reveal.

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### **Kelly says**

One of my friends chose this book for our book club. In it is the story, from young childhood to old age, of Dorothy Forrest and her family. It's broken into chapters which do not make obvious the characters' ages, which I found quite rewarding to read; this tactic reminded me of *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Maybe this resonated with me because of the stage I'm at in my life, but Dorothy's long-standing love with Daniel hit a nerve, and I thought it was well presented. I finished it and wanted to make a few of my friends read it right away.

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### **Christine says**

Dorothy Forrest is immersed in the sensory world around her; she lives in the flickering moment. From the age of seven, when her odd, disenfranchised family moves from New York City to the wide skies of Auckland, to the very end of her life, this is her great gift and possible misfortune. Through the wilderness of a commune, to falling in love, to early marriage and motherhood, from the glorious anguish of parenting to the loss of everything worked for and the unexpected return of love, Dorothy is swept along by time. Her family looms and recedes; revelations come to light; death changes everything, but somehow life remains as potent as it ever was, and the joy in just being won't let her go. In a narrative that shifts and moves, growing as wild as the characters, *The Forrests* is an extraordinary literary achievement. A novel that sings with colour and memory, it speaks of family and time, dysfunction, ageing and loneliness, about heat, youth, and how life can change if 'you're lucky enough to be around for it'.

DNF - despite the hype about this book and giving it my best shot I just couldn't get enthused. The disjointed random snapshots of Dorothy's life were hard to follow and fathom. In the end I just didn't care enough about the characters because I never really got to understand them. Sent it back to the library about 2/3rds of the way through.

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### **Lydia Presley says**

When I picked up *The Forrests* I prepared myself for a "literary treat." I'd gathered from the descriptions on

the back that I was in store for beautiful writing - and with a setting in New Zealand, I could not wait to get started.

As I read *The Forrests* the literary scholar in me warred with the reader who just wanted to enjoy a good book. I fought with myself, admiring the deft descriptions and the way every scene came to life - but the reader in me wanted a story that I could follow. Not an easy story, mind you - but one that I could at least figure out by page 50 or so.

Now, I've read Booker Prize winners, I've read classics - in fact, I just this year learned to appreciate and enjoy some of the most difficult literature I've ever read (*To the Lighthouse* people.. Virginia Woolf is not for the distracted reader!). But I could not get into this book. And it's not because there's a lack of action - some of my favorite books involve quiet stories about every day life. No, it was the muddled confusion that I felt while reading sentences that seemed... well grammatically incorrect. It was the lack of clarification on who was who leaving me to mentally wave the white flag and try to just push my way through the book.

And that's what I did. I mechanically turned the pages, and instead of enjoying a story about Dorothy, I enjoyed beautifully turned phrases and snippets here and there of what broke through to me.

I'm really disappointed that this book did not connect with me - and maybe the next time I pick it up to try again it'll work. But this time, especially with a scheduled review of it on the horizon, it did not work for me at all.

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### **Michael says**

*The Forrests* by Emily Perkins was the book chosen for my local bookclub for June, but I knew I wouldn't be able to make it to this discussion so I decided to read this while in New Zealand as the author is a New Zealander. This book has already been talked about in regards to being listed for this year's Man Booker prize so I was interested in seeing what the book was all about. The novel follows the story of The Forrests, a disenfranchised family that moves from New York City to Auckland. It follows the dramas of a family, dealing with normal every day issues; from love, marriage, motherhood and parenting to the financial issue, loneliness and a range of other issues that come with a dysfunctional family.

This book is a bit strange, you start off with all the dramas of this family and throughout the book the issues never end. While you are looking on you never seem to be given enough information to fully understand what is happening and how the characters are feeling. Like the author was always holding the full story from the reader and just expecting them to guess. Each chapter is another scene which I've been thrust into without being armed with the relevant information to navigate through it properly. The family dramas never really ended in this book and I just couldn't wait to get to the end of this book.

This is a beautiful piece of writing and Emily Perkins did a decent job at capturing a family in their flaws but I didn't enjoy *The Forrests* so the writing was let down by the characters. It was a bit of a dreamlike book that did grow on you a little but for me it wasn't enough to pull me to enjoying this novel. I think some people will really enjoy this book, it starts off by putting you in the deep end and I suspect it grows on some readers, just not on me.

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## **Sharon Burgin says**

You cannot fault the synopsis on the cover of this book. It does say that this is the story of Dorothy Forrest from the age of seven to the end of her life, and boy does she have a long life.

Dorothy is one of 3 sisters and a brother. The first part of the book you spend your time trying to figure out which sister is which and who is sleeping with Daniel, the family friend. The second half of the book is spent trying to picture whether Dorothy is fat or thin!

This is one boring book about the Forrest family. You keep waiting for something to happen, but as with most families, nothing does. I recommend that you give this book a miss and spend your time investigating your own family history. Even if you have no war heroes or Nobel prize winners in your family, it's bound to be more exciting than what happens to the Forrests, as nothing out of the ordinary does happen.

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## **Helen Heath says**

Achingly beautiful and moving. Not sure why some people thought nothing happened, a whole life happened!

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## **Patricia Gallant says**

Maybe I didn't get it, I just found this story uninteresting. In fact, I found it terribly lacking. The events described were not described in full, or even to a finish. She was stopped for shoplifting, they looked at pictures of previous offenders... and then what? The storyteller wandered off and we never found out what happened in that circumstance. There was a lot of guessing for the reader. I don't think I knew until the last 10 pages or so where the story took place.

From an award-winning writer this book disappointed me. I got through it quickly because I wanted to get it finished so I could move onto another book. I honestly couldn't tell you what this story was about except the life of a person from childhood to old age with not very much interesting happening in between.

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## **Elyse Walters says**

Library ebook

I debated on writing a review... but here goes.  
I started reading this carefully- taking notes...  
( and why was I doing this???)...  
I have no agreements with anyone.

There were too many things I didn't enjoy about this novel.  
For starters ... I don't like when a novel introduces eight characters in the first chapter. It's too many for my

brain.

I caught on ....

but my interest in the story was drifting in-and-out.

From early childhood to old age we follow \*Dot\*... with many other characters who are a part of her life..... but honestly I couldn't stay interested ....

I started speed reading ...

only slowing down in 'some' bit parts I liked —and even those parts didn't seem as if they were necessarily connected to anything important.

Much of this book felt choppy- too long - disjointed... and often plain dull.

It had all the elements we find in family life - all the universal themes - but I was bored.

This book made me feel as if something is wrong with me.

Maybe there is— something wrong with me...

A flat as a pancake novel for me....with a few yummy blueberries 'occasionally' ....

2.5 stars

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### **Courtney Johnston says**

Intense emotion - high or low - thins your skin. You *feel* things with a new intensity - the barrier between you and the world becomes more porous; sunrises seep into you, words seduce you, paintings leave you wounded, breathless, tearstreaked. You feel like this when you're first in love - or you feel something like this, a tinge of it, a sharpening of the world, but this is a peripheral phenomenon; the newly loved one is the centre, the discovery, the endlessly fascinating, endlessly absorbing. The world feels brighter just because they're there.

Grief though. You'd think it would make the world dimmer, greyer, but the opposite occurs. The world becomes high-keyed, hyper-saturated, almost kinesthetic. You are so alert, so sleep-deprived, so sensitive to every shifting emotional tone in yourself and all those near you... and perhaps so fortunate that all this strikes awe in you, not fear.

It was this sensation I re-experienced over and over again reading 'The Forrests'. It's generally being viewed as a book in which life - nothing more or less mundane or amazing - plays out, from near cradle to near grave, traced through the central character, Dorothy Forrest: the fluctuating tides of her family and then her marriage, as parents and brothers and sisters and children and husband and lover draw closer and recede.

Perkins breaks intense, minute, almost hallucinatory passages of observation with cinematic leaps in time and occasionally character, often eliding key moments so that, like Dorothy, we come back to experience them events that shape the new present, rather than taking part in the event itself. In fact, events are lavished with much less attention than non-events: here is Dorothy's sister Evelyn cooking during a brief stint as a

chalet girl.

She put the macaroni cheese in the oven and started on the birthday cake. She cut adze-shaped chunks of butter and wiped them off the knife with a finger into a large bowl with a chip out of its rim the size of a fingernail.. The fine white sugar poured into a peak on top of the butter, a mountain in the bowl. She sniffed the wooden spoon, which smelled of onions, and scrubbed it under hot water then used it to beat the butter and sugar together hard. The eggs were thick-shelled, hard to crack, with a taut matt skin between each shell and the contents. In the bowl they created a separated viscous swirl with the creamed-butter mixture, the yolk trailing through the pale butter, the transparent whites floating jellyishly around the surface. The fragments of shell were tacky and sharp when Evelyn carried them in cupped palms to the rubbish bin. She sifted flour and baking powder over the wet mixture and a fine dust sprayed over the bench, down her apron, and on to the floor. The vanilla essence bottle was empty; she shook it over the bowl but only that sweet, oozy smell wafted out, and she threw the bottle over to the bin, and it bounced off the rim and skittered along the floor.

Ursula Le Guin, reviewing 'The Forrests' in the Guardian, was irritated by Perkins's static mannerism. I don't agree. I read the book in tiny, tiny chunks - pages, not even chapters - worrying little about the narrative, simply sinking in to the moment I opened the book to. Like Le Guin though I found the book deeply sad - elating in the early sections, where Dorothy is all wildness and potency, deeply sad as she ages and her decisions and non-decisions become the horizons of her world. I feel that everyone who makes it to the end of 'The Forrests' will come out of it with a different conclusion - some may admire Dorothy, empathise with her, dislike her, fear her. I see her as salutary, perhaps not what Perkins intended at all. I doubt very much Perkins wants us to *learn* anything from the book. Yet I couldn't close it for that final time last night without thinking again of my imaginary friend, 80 year-old me, and how much she doesn't want me to turn out like Dorothy.

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### **Kate says**

You'll either love, love, love Emily Perkins' sinuous, dreamy writing in The Forrests, or you will find her style unbearably tedious. I loved it.

The Forrests is the story of a family, told mostly through the eyes of Dorothy (Dot) Forrest. It begins when she is seven and, along with her parents, brother Michael and sisters Eve and Ruth, we see the family move, change and experience happy and sad times. But calling this simply a 'family saga' does not do justice to Perkins' extraordinary style of storytelling.

The first thing that struck me about The Forrests was Perkins' sentences. They're layered, long, mesmerizing, sumptuous.

Read my full review (with lots of lovely quotes) here - <http://booksaremyfavouriteandbest.wor...>

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I first heard about this book in Publishers Weekly's Fiction Review, so when I was given the opportunity to be a participant in a virtual book tour for it, I jumped at the chance.

This is pitched as a dysfunctional family book, and that isn't wrong exactly, but I think it takes more of an explanation. The story is told in vignettes and I think I was probably 1/3 of the way in before I had a clear grasp of the characters. Even then, I am not sure I ever completely grasped what was motivating Daniel, Lee, or even Dorothy most of the time. The children (the Forrests) would slip in and out of stories at such rapid frequency that it was difficult to keep track or really understand. The parents are practically nonexistent, and the children don't really do a good job at making their own way, crisscrossing between countries and continents. Family at one point is referred to as a "thrashing octopus," and I think the events and struggles are very reflective of this concept.

Some of the stories are more effective than others. My favorite was not very far in, "Out There" (chapter 5), chronicling when Daniel and Evelyn are briefly living together at a ski resort. It was beautifully told - painful, tiny details that become important, and unresolved. I wish more of the book had been so effective.

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### **Justin Morelli says**

There is a lot to love and a lot to hate about this book. Following the life of one woman and her family from childhood to old age, this flows through the milestones that mark her life.

If you love observational comedy, but don't mind not laughing, this might be right up your street.

On the plus side, it is beautifully written, achingly touching and epic. In addition, this occasionally hits the nail on the head when capturing fleeting emotions possibly better than any work I have ever read.

However, this rambles vaguely - it is often unclear who is being described, and consequently this becomes regularly hard to understand. Although certain emotions are nailed, very little depth is ever really added to the characters, and although a life passes, very little of any significance really happens.

The best example of all this is probably a description of making a cake which goes on for pretty much a whole page. The cake is of no consequence, and has no real part to play in the chapter at all. However, the level of detail and observation in the process is unparalleled.

I loved it, but can totally understand why anybody would give up reading this. If you don't like it after the first few chapters, I suspect persevering would be pointless.

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