



The Irresistible Henry House

Lisa Grunwald

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In this captivating novel, bestselling author Lisa Grunwald gives us the sweeping tale of an irresistible hero and the many women who love him. In the middle of the twentieth century, in a home economics program at a prominent university, orphaned babies are being used to teach mothering skills to young women. For Henry House, raised in these unlikely circumstances, finding real love and learning to trust will prove to be the work of a lifetime. From his earliest days as a “practice baby” through his adult adventures in 1960s New York City, Disney’s Burbank studios, and the delirious world of the Beatles’ London, Henry remains handsome, charming, universally adored—but unable to return the affections of the many women who try to lay claim to his heart. It is not until Henry comes face-to-face with the truths of his past that he finds a chance for real love.

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The Irresistible Henry House Details

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From Reader Review The Irresistible Henry House for online ebook

AlmieMeg says

The descriptive writing is excellent. The characters, the settings and the detailed movement that brings a book to life drew me into the book. It is evident that a great deal of intricate work went into the creation of this book and the writing shows that. Disappointingly, there is no discernible plot to this book and there is no ending. If it was meant to be a character study and I somehow missed that fact, then....my bad. I apologize for this review. We follow the main character, Henry, through a series of life's encounters from his infancy, through his rebellious teen years, and until he is a twenty-something young man. We're thrown into his relationships, basically all with women, many of them sexual. He's clearly a very lost person having been passed around his entire life, and never feeling that he belonged to anyone because he was a practice baby for young girls in college home economics program. He eventually finds a very successful career in a creative art field, but he feels inhibited by what he feels is a lack of genuine creativity. He moves all over the map from East Coast to West Coast to East Coast to Europe and back, while we are waiting for a plot to develop. He eventually appreciates his birth mother, who left him 3 times. But he never comes full circle and shows any love for the one stable and consistent person in his life; the woman who mothered him and loved him unconditionally and taught him to take care of himself. And in the end he turns to his best childhood friend seeking something more than friendship and the story simply stops. It stops with a confusing mixed message. We don't know if he sheds a tear because it's a relationship that will never develop, or if he's drawing a picture of a house because he will settle down and marry this friend. With so much descriptive detail, this story just rambles. If only it had a well-developed plot, it would have been an excellent read. Instead it left me feeling rather cheated.

Sheryl says

Henry House is a "practice baby" in a home economics class in the 1940s. I had never heard about practice babies before. The schools would take orphan babies, and let students practice taking care of them. Then they would be adopted out when they were toddlers. The instructor for this class, Martha Gaines, is especially drawn to baby Henry, and asks to raise him as her own child.

Henry has such appeal to women, everyone wants to be his favorite, and he does not want to be tied to one woman. As he grows up, he breaks hearts right and left, and leaves Martha for his birth mother, and then for a life with Disney as a cartoonist. His skill takes him to London to work on the Beatles movie "Yellow Submarine," where he lives with another practice baby who is even more detached than he is.

His conversations with Walt Disney and the Beatles reminded me of Forrest Gump, being in the right place at the right time. The book is a fascinating look at a little known cultural phenomenon, and an examination of the possible long-term effects it could have had on the lives of the children involved.

Ellene says

I had a hard time liking Henry for about 85% of this book because he seemed like he was so self-absorbed and refusing to take responsibility for himself--such a drama-mama. His reaction to his adoptive mother Martha as well as birth mother Betty is understandable but extreme. But then again, his reactions to the only person who ever accepted him as is, Mary Jane, was also quite extreme at times. It was MJ who really kept me going throughout this book. Because if she could accept him for what he is--a baby-cum-man who was shaped by too many mothers and none simultaneously--then shouldn't I? I'm glad that I did stick with it because he eventually does get to the place that I hoped for him--and accepts what has happened to him enough to move forward in a healthy way.

Grunwald's writing is a bit stiff in some places but captures the times well--from the stodgy 1950s to the free-wheeling 1960s. She captures the essence of Henry without apologies and lays him bare in a way that is both compelling and disquieting. She also brings to attention the idea of practice babies in Home Economics programs back then. (I certainly had no clue that this was done, although am not surprised.)

Nette says

I. Loved. This. Book. (Do I sound emphatic enough?) It follows the life of a home ec "practice" baby (they really had them!) as he grows up through the 50s and 60s. It's a bit like Garp without the bears and wrestling, or Zelig without quite so many historical figures, or Gump without the sap. Please. Read.

Hara says

Really wanted to like this book; it sounded so compelling. But I really hated the main character. It *can* be ok to hate a main character if the author makes a good explanation for his abhorrent personality. But I feel like the author completely failed at this. Henry was just a jerk. No childhood trauma. C'mon, connect the dots for me as to WHY being raised in that manner would cause him to be such an indifferent, un-trusting, arrogant person. Crying, at age one, because of a switch in caregiver. Eh! Parents leave babies that age with babysitters and sneak out the door all the time. It was interesting that at two points in the book, women questioned his pathology...I believe Karen asked him why it was so bad to have been raised by a houseful of practice mothers, and Annie (maybe) asked him why it was so bad for him to act like Martha's son, and I don't think he answered either one, or even thought about either question introspectively. And what exactly, is so bad about Martha? Even the questions at the end of the book say "is anything redeeming about Martha?" Seriously?! How many parents (adoptive or biological) have a baby because they want to feel needed, or because they're dealing with a loss, (probably the majority) and what is wrong with that? It's the amount of love they offer, not why they had a kid, that is important. How can Henry deny her love and not forgive her lie and even expect HER to apologize on her deathbed? Ugh. And don't get me started on the misogyny of this book, as well as the implicit underlying notion that the only good family setup is a traditional mother-father one. And one more thing...it is never explained WHY Henry is so damned irresistible. Because he's good-looking and indifferent? Again, ugh. This goes along with the misogyny--the awful stereotype that all (or most) women are attracted to jerks, or men who act badly but they believe they can change. And one more thing. (Can't stop writing because I keep remembering other annoying things about this book!) It rings completely falsely to me that Peace turns out to be just like Henry when, really, her upbringing was completely different. Oh, no, she's behaving in London just like Henry did in California. To

go back to the misogyny theme, she is punished for sleeping with 3 people at the same time while Henry suffers no repercussions. Punished by Henry, who is unconvincingly in love for real this time--again, no connection of the dots by the author...the relationship is not described any differently than his other relationships. This book had so much potential because the subject is so interesting but the author fails, instead choosing to fawn over the main character, apparently **because** he is the main character, in a manner much like (almost) every female character in the book.

Dianna says

This review is probably only appropriate for folks who have already read or probably won't read the book. Since I don't think I'd recommend it to anyone, I'm not going to be shy about the spoilers.

Henry House was a practice baby in a 1940s-50s College Home Economics Program. His mother (who'd given him to an orphanage at birth) was the daughter of the President of the University, and as such got herself inserted into that class as well as the baby. She begs the Home Ec professor (who desperately clings to Henry) to keep the baby, since she cannot. She goes to join her AWOL (from WWII) husband in Australia to become a drunk. So Henry is raised by dozens of different mothers... the closest thing to a real one he had (the professor) was just using him to fill a void in her own life. She's constantly staring into his eyes searching for the love she so desperately needs. When he asks about his real mother, she so desperately wishes it were her that she invents a lie... a lie that, when revealed by his own drunk mother's return, turns Henry against her for life. He remains with her, feigns muteness, and gets sent away to a boarding school for special needs kids.

And so the majority of the book is Henry's childhood spent learning what love might be like, having come from this unique situation.

There are some really fun settings, as a teenaged Henry becomes an animator for Disney during Mary Poppins and the Jungle Book, as well as later for the Yellow Submarine. It's got a good sense of period, which was fun to read.

I think the book would be infinitely more interesting if it spent only a couple of chapters on his origin, and instead focused on the adult life of a man who was raised that way. When the book ends, I think Henry's only about 20-22 or so, and the majority of the book examined his sexual maturation -- which could be decidedly odd as he never had a single adult male role model.

It's not set up for a sequel at all, but if there is one, then I bet I would like it quite a bit.

Gwen says

The subject of this book --following a boy whose first two years were as the "house" baby in a home economics practice house -- piqued my interest. Since it dovetails with current research interest and time period, and friends who have heard of the book asked if I'd read it (yet), I got it and finally read it.

As promised, the novel follows the life of Henry House, so-named by the faculty supervisor of the practice house (all of "her" children bore H-first name House as their monikers for their first two years). We follow

Henry through his first three decades. Kept but not adopted by the house mother, Henry learns at an early age good manners, how to run a house properly, how to talk (listen!) to women, and that loving someone rarely means they'll be in one's life permanently. As he matures, he meets his real mother; holds out hope that she will, as she promises, come back for him; learns how to observe and manipulate; hones his skills as a copier or mimic of artistic style; and eventually figures out what a real relationship could (or should?) mean. The details about home economics as an academic discipline, and changes in child care (exit John Watson, enter Benjamin Spock), are spot on. I think that the author wants to hang Henry's hat --his ambivalence towards women, distrust about relationships-- on his mothering (by many women, not forming a permanent attachment with any of them). But for a boy who comes of age as an adult in the 1960s with drugs, alcohol, sex, music and the art scene, it begs the question: is it all really the mother's fault? How much of this can be attributed to larger social forces? More than that, for a boy raised under Watson's directives rather than Spock's, as surely many of his contemporaries were, is that really fair? Much to ponder ...

Garlan ✋ says

We all have that one friend, or know someone, who's that glib, smooth talking, somewhat careless person that everyone seems to like or hate equally. Henry is that fellow. Born an orphan and raised in a "practice house" for young ladies studying home economics, Henry has affection lavished on him from an early age. He doesn't seem to develop many lasting attachments to anyone but Mary Jane, the only female in this story that Henry doesn't have a fling with. We follow him from childhood, to young adolescence, and finally into early manhood. He grows up in the cultural revolution of the 60's and a lot of that is captured in this book. He has a lot of relationships, but none seem to affect him too deeply.

As I read this story, I was reminded of a quote that Gus McRae applies to Jake Spoon in "Lonesome Dove" - something along the lines of "he was far too leaky a vessel to hold much water". And that's the feeling I got regarding Henry. I like him, but I wouldn't put a great deal of trust in him.

In a way, I treated this really good, well written book a bit like Henry treated his relationships. I liked it, I appreciated the craftsmanship and the story, but I kept putting it aside for other books that came along. I'm glad I returned and finished this book. It really is a very good read.

Sandi says

The Irresistible Henry House is an irresistible novel. (Sorry, I couldn't resist.) I was as charmed by Henry's story every bit as much as the women in his life. About 3/4 of the way through listening to the story, I realized that it reminded me a lot of the movie *Forrest Gump*. Well, maybe not so much. Henry isn't an innocent and he doesn't love his mama. In fact, he doesn't really have a mama. Henry started out life as a practice baby in a practice house with six different practice mothers rotating mothering duties each week. As a result, he never really forms any strong attachments and never really has any strong male role models. Instead, he learns to be a social chameleon so everyone likes him and women love him.

So, why was I reminded of *Forrest Gump*? This novel covers a quarter century of American (and English) life at a period of enormous change from the post-WWII era through the 1960's. Henry meets famous people like Walt Disney and the Beatles. Dr. Benjamin Spock makes an appearance too. Henry becomes an Everyman who allows us to experience what it must have been like to be young during such a pivotal period in American/British civilization. And, you can't help but root for Henry. He's despicable in many ways, but you know that's because he's lost.

The audio production of this novel was very good. The narrator does an excellent job with the dialogue, especially Henry's. Whatever age Henry is, the narrator reads his dialogue appropriately. He doesn't do such a great job with the women's dialogue, but he's pitch-perfect with children's voices. It's very easy for children to be read badly, and the narrator here doesn't fall into the usual traps, like lisping and baby talk.

I highly recommend this book if you want something that raises interesting ideas but doesn't get totally depressing.

Lori says

The premise of this book intrigued me - a college Home Economics class raising a "practice baby"?! Then, I discovered that this actually happened from 1917 to the early 60's in universities all over the country! This is a fictional account of one of those babies. From the very beginning when we meet the house mother in the mid 1940's who has been running the local university's "Practice House" for years and then as we watch the entire process of obtaining, naming and raising a "practice baby" unfold we get an inside look back at the time and prevailing thoughts of the mid-twentieth century, especially as they relate to child rearing. There is such a nostalgic feel to the beginning of this book and the story was well told in such an engaging way that I had a hard time putting it down.

I have studied family systems for years and there was quite a bit of conjecture about what happens to children who have different family systems. Some of the conclusions I found rather implausible while I found some fascinating and psychologically sound. All of the questions you have about what might happen emotionally to a child who is passed off from "mother" to "mother" for the first few years of their life is examined here. I am not a big fan of the pop culture of the 1960's so as the story moved into that time period, I did not enjoy it as much but if you're going to follow someone born in the 1940's into adulthood, the 60's are going to come in to play, like it or not.

Overall, highly recommended.

N W James says

I think most of the book group would agree that they liked the book well enough while they were actually reading it. "It was a good read" was an often spoken sentence. Stop reading now if you have plans to tackle this book and you don't want to start it with prejudices.

The good news is the author knows how to propel the storyline and can turn a pretty phrase. However, there were some major issues with the plot. The bad news is once you're done reading this book and you reflect on the story arc, you might have some trouble paving over the holes.

Loose ends were strewn everywhere in this story. Often characters would come upon a situation in which the narrator says something like "it would be years before this character would realize the implication of their actions". Realizations that would never come, in fact I can't think of one character who significantly changed during the telling of the story. A hint of change lies at the end that the title character has made some progress, but it is subtle and noncommittal (just like that character).

Also, several plots lead nowhere that seem as if more time should have been spent explaining their random insertion into the storyline: the art room fire and its fallout, Henry's relationship with the photographer, the advance in the school shower room. And several plot points are so lazily or inexpertly written they made my eyes roll: Peace breaking Henry's heart in what has got to be the most expected and banal way (as opposed to Henry and Mary Jane's relationship), Henry's inability to draw without copying (we got it, it's a MAJOR THEME), and the whole Walt Disney plot (one group member mentioned that the story turned into Forrest Gump at this point).

We talked quite a bit about how the young Henry House was written so precociously when he was little, that the reader could easily forget (or in my case not even realize) that by the time the story ends he's barely 20 years old. It forced the reader to expect more from that character very early on. Apparently an actual study was done that suggested children who do not form attachments within the first few months of life turn out to be horribly maladjusted adults. Because of this idea and how Henry was written early on some of us thought Henry would start killing people at any moment in the story. One of us also pointed out the worst written scene of teenage masturbation ever.

The story of a practice baby has a lot of potential. Lisa Grunwald seemed to focus on the overall attachment issues people would have who were raised in a Home Ec practice house. She wrote on this subject very convincingly. I very much enjoyed the beginning of the book. But when it comes to unleashing Henry to the world, the story jumped several sharks that made one of our group have to go back to the first page to see if the story started with the phrase 'Once upon a time.'

For a better told psychological story, try either Set This House In Order by Matt Ruff or Riven Rock by T.C. Boyle. For a better epic family tale, try either Bloodroot by Amy Greene or The Little Giant of Aberdeen County by Tiffany Baker.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

For me, this book's greatest appeal was the overview of American culture in the mid-20th century. If you were alive between 1946 and 1968, this will be a fun stroll down Memory Lane. If you're too young to have been there, this is your nice light primer on the era. Grunwald manages to toss in the most memorable trivia about social attitudes, clothing, decor, music, and current events of the period.

Henry's life begins with the post-war optimism of the late 1940s and progresses through the golly-gee-whiz wholesomeness of the 1950s followed by the boldly defiant, garishly colored, drug-laced 1960s. His restlessness as a young adult is the perfect vehicle for exploring New York City, California, and London in the psychedelic '60s.

The scene where Henry loses his virginity is brilliant. It's not graphic or even particularly sexual, which is what makes it funny. His desperation and eagerness for the experience makes that all-important first time awkward, unsatisfying, and comical. And it's a great way for the author to include a reference to Joe Palooka, hee hee.

I had a hard time dredging up much sympathy for Henry. Yes, his upbringing in the "practice house" (WHAT! WERE! THEY! THINKING!?) was unconventional and lacking in some ways. But he was never abused, neglected, or molested. I couldn't actively dislike him, but he just seemed so much like other guys I've met (and dated) who want every woman they hook up with to compensate for their wounded childhoods. Get over yourself, boy.

My favorite character is fairly minor, but I was always happy to see her pop back into the story. Solid, reliable, straightforward, no-nonsense Ethel. She's always there in a practical way when Henry needs her, but she never pities or babies him.

I like Grunwald's writing. It has the smoothness of an experienced author, and never gets too heavy or melodramatic.

Jackie says

I am utterly captivated with this book because its premise is SO fascinating, especially since it's based in historical fact. Apparently, from the 1920s to the 1960s, there were collegiate level home economics classes that involved rotations in a 'practice house' taking care of a real live 'practice baby'. Orphanages literally "loaned" babies to these college programs for roughly two years per baby, and several women worked weekly rotations being in charge. The whole program was actually quite brilliant, since it was a quiet way of teaching women high level physics, mathematics, mechanics, economics etc. under the guise of letting them earn their MRS degrees (example: one project was to dismantle and then reassemble a refrigerator). Grunwald takes us into that world, with a stern proctor named Martha, an unusually charming orphan named Henry and his 6 practice mothers. The book follows Henry from 3 months old to roughly 25 years old and shows what might have happened to a boy raised in such a way. Grunwald carefully weaves in actual psychological studies done on real "practice babies" as well as extremely clever character development of her own, generously spiced with the cultural details of the changes that happened throughout the 1950s and 60s to create a truly absorbing story. You've never read a book like this one. I guarantee it.

Melissa says

This is a strange one, a book that is chock full of interesting plot points, but that lacks any likable characters. Henry House is a practice baby provided by a local orphanage for a small Pennsylvania women's college in the 1940s. This is something that really happened from 1919 to 1969; orphans were used in home economic courses to help teach young women how to care for babies.

Martha runs the practice house where Henry lives and eventually becomes his mother. We also find out who his real mother is and we see Henry live a Goldilocks-style life, with one mother too old to understand him and the other too young to care for him properly. Henry spends his whole life watching anyone he loves eventually leave him. Because of this he's unable to form any real connections with people.

At one point Martha compares Henry's upbringing to that of the rhesus monkeys that were experimented on. They were given wire "mothers" that dispensed milk and cloth "mothers." The monkeys preferred the cloth surrogate mothers, but in the end they all went mad because they had no real mother, no real caregiver. It's a dark and disturbing thought coming from the woman who is supposed to be his "mother."

We follow Henry throughout his childhood and early adulthood, watching the world change around him in dramatic ways. The book is almost reminiscent of Forrest Gump in the fact that we see dozens of major events and famous people cross paths with Henry in one way or another. There's a mini history lesson on each page and that was by far my favorite aspect of the novel.

BOTTOM LINE: Worth reading if you're curious about the history of using practice babies or about Disney animators. The writing style reminds me a lot of John Irving – even when you don't like the characters the story is still quirky and compulsively readable, but it leaves me feeling dissatisfied. I think I would have preferred a nonfiction book on the subject to this.

"If he had no one, he figured, he would have no one to lose."

Faith says

Show! Don't Tell!!

I wanted so badly to love this book, but it was not meant to be. The biggest problem I had was that I'd put it down and not care if I picked it up again. At first, I attributed this to the fact that I'd started it just before Christmas. By mid-January, however, I realized it was the book. After thinking about why that was so, I realized this book is 99% telling and 1% showing. Grunwald broke the cardinal rule for writers -- Show, don't tell!!

Clearly, based on other reviews, there are people who don't mind a telling book. If it were shorter, I might not have minded it, myself. Grunwald writes well and I enjoyed her descriptive scenes, particularly in California and London. What the telling does for me, however, is make me not care about any of the characters. The main characters are particularly annoying. By the end of the book, the only character I liked was Mary Jane. It had no intimacy for me. I didn't get to 'know' these characters, and learn about them that way. It was Lisa Grunwald telling me about these characters she knew. She was always telling me how they felt and what they thought. I never got the chance to learn these things myself. They became, for the most part, characters I didn't want to hear about.

Beyond my not getting to know the characters, I also got the feeling they were too 'scripted.' I don't get the feeling that Henry or Martha or Betty told Grunwald how (s)he felt about anything. Grunwald had a story to tell and made her characters fit the story. The fact that Peace was so much like Henry, even though she had been adopted, reinforced this 'make the character fit the story' sense. The biggest flaw I saw here was Henry's attitude to Martha. It didn't make sense to me at all. She was the one constant he'd had. Yes, he would be angry at her for lying to him. Yes, he'd want to run away with Betty. Yes, he'd likely want to leave home ASAP (or else become a 'mama's boy'). But, I think part of all of that, once he got over the initial anger at Martha for lying, would be, not because he had no feeling for her, but because he did have feelings and needed to get away from her smothering.

As I write this, I think maybe, possibly, Grunwald expected the reader to realize he actually did have feelings for Martha. I still believe that the telling manner of writing makes this much more difficult for the reader to see. If one gets to see Henry's emotions, rather than be told about them, one can then determine that he thinks he feels nothing for Martha, but actually really does.

Kudos to Grunwald for the ending. I tend to doubt that Henry would have made the realization about Mary Jane as young as he did, but her reaction was absolutely right. It is this ending, Henry's realization, that makes me wonder if everything we are told about how he feels about things is accurate, though it's all too vague. I sort of suspected that was how it would end for Henry and was really concerned that it would be a sappy ending. I was delighted it wasn't. It is this ending (along with the Disney and London settings, so well described) that made the book worth reading, for me.

If you like a literary style (I do) and don't mind telling (I do), go ahead and read this book. If you prefer action stories or at least a feeling of actually getting to know the characters, you probably won't care for this book.
