



## Etta and Otto and Russel and James

*Emma Hooper*

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## **Etta and Otto and Russel and James** Emma Hooper

A gorgeous literary debut about an elderly woman's last great adventure walking across Canada. A beautiful novel of pilgrimage, of fulfilling lifelong promises, of a talking coyote called James, of unlikely heroes and hundreds of papier-mâché animals...

Eighty-two-year-old Etta has never seen the ocean. So early one morning she takes a rifle, some chocolate, and her best boots, and begins walking the 3,232 kilometers from rural Canada eastward to the coast.

Her husband Otto wakes to a note left on the kitchen table. I will try to remember to come back, Etta writes to him. Otto has seen the ocean, having crossed the Atlantic years ago to fight in a far-away war. He understands. But with Etta gone, the memories come crowding in and Otto struggles to keep them at bay.

Russell has spent his whole life trying to keep up with Otto and loving Etta from afar. Russell insists on finding Etta, wherever she's gone. Leaving his own farm will be the first act of defiance in his life.

As Etta walks further toward the ocean, accompanied by a coyote named James, the lines among memory, illusion, and reality blur. Rocking back and forth with the pull of the waves, Etta and Otto and Russell and James moves from the hot and dry present of a quiet Canadian farm to a dusty burnt past of hunger, war, passion, and hope; from trying to remember to trying to forget; and inspires each of its characters to visit the sites they've longed to see and say the things they've longed to say. This is dazzling literary fiction about the rediscovery and care of the soul, and the idea it's never too late for a great adventure.

## **Etta and Otto and Russel and James Details**

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# From Reader Review Etta and Otto and Russel and James for online ebook

**Carole (Carole's Random Life in Books) says**

This review can also be found at Carole's Random Life.

2 Stars

This book didn't work for me. I read a lot of books because I enjoy reading. I love connecting with a story, falling in love with characters, and everything involved with being told a really great story. When I come to the end of a book, I love the feeling of satisfaction that I get with most stories. This book left me feeling completely underwhelmed and quite confused.

I liked the idea behind this book and decided to read it because it is different than what I would normally chose to read. I thought that this book was very easy to read and I liked the fact that the letters between Etta and Otto helped tell the story. I am a huge fan of quirky characters but the characters in this book just seemed overly odd

I had some issues with quite a few things in this book. First of all, I didn't like the fact that not a single quotation mark was used in the book. There was a lot of dialog but not a single quotation mark. I know that the author choose to omit quotation marks for some purpose but I found it confusing overall. I thought that the writing style was a bit oversimplified and vague for my tastes.

I really have no problems in just going along with an unrealistic story. I do it all the time and it doesn't bother me and I usually enjoy that type of story. When a story crosses over the threshold from unrealistic into ridiculous as it did in this book, I start having a hard time. This story is about a woman in her 80's, Etta, who decides to walk thousands of kilometers across Canada so that she can see the ocean. Etta has trouble remembering things but she promises in the letter to her husband, Otto, that she will try to remember to come back. What does Otto do when he sees this letter from his wife? He doesn't try to find her. Instead, he learns to cook and starts making paper mache animals.

I did like the parts of the book that took place in the past much better than those set in the present day. Even with all of that background information, I just never really understood Etta and Otto's love story. I felt a little bad for Russell because he always seemed to be on the sidelines but I don't think that his character added much to the story. Etta's companion on her walk, James, is a coyote that talks to Etta. The magical realism didn't add anything to this story in my opinion.

As I read the book, I hoped that the ending would make everything worthwhile. I thought that the ending of this book was horrible and pointless. I would not recommend this book to others.

*I received a copy of this book from Simon & Schuster via Net Galley for the purpose of providing an honest review.*

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## Magdalena says

There is Etta. Etta is 82 and she has never seen the sea. So she is walking, walking to the sea to finally see it. Etta is starting to forget things.

There is Otto. Etta's husband. Otto remembers everything. So they balance. Otto loves Etta so, so much.

There is Etta. She answers Otto's letters when he is away. And she bakes and bakes and bakes.

There is Otto. He is away. It is the war. Otto writes to Etta. He is scared. Sometimes things are not quite what you imagined them to be.

There is Russell. Good, old Russell with a dead leg. He is Otto's friend and he loves Etta. And he remembers but remembers differently. Russell is trying to track the deer, has been trying for years.

There is Etta. She is walking and she is writing to Otto. She is finally doing it, she is going to see the big water.

There is Otto. He answers Etta's letters. And he makes things, papier-mache animals, makes them and makes them. Like Etta used to bake.

There is James. James is a coyote. James is also Etta's companion, walking with her.

There is a book. "Etta and Otto and Russell and James". It is a beautiful book. Pure, heartfelt book. And I love it so please read it. It is worth it.

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## Jill says

I'm not quite sure what to make of Emma Hooper's dreamlike debut novel and after turning the last page, I'm not even sure whether I liked it or not.

The book has been compared – unjustly, I think – with Rachel Joyce's *The Pilgrimage* of Harold Fry. Indeed, in both books, an elderly protagonist (in this case, Etta) toes on an unexpected lengthy and arduous pilgrimage. Etta, a woman in her early 80s who is suffering from early-stage dementia, departs from her Saskatchewan farm to view the ocean. She leaves behind Otto, a one-time soldier and loving husband, and shy Russell, who was raised as Otto's brother and still carries a torch for her. And then there's James, but the fewer initial expectations a reader has of James, the better.

The book certainly is grounded in the real world – the sights, sounds, rhythms, the trying to remember to forget. Yet there's something downright myth-like about the tale, from the deceptively childlike cadence of the dialogue to the Etta's dreamy sojourn with nary but a coyote – long a symbol of the deep magic of life and creation – as her companion.

To read this book as a straightforward account is, I believe, a mistake. It must be read as a fantasy with elements of magical realism...the last twilight as we let go of the fundamentals of living and enter into the unknown. With forays into the Depression and World War II, into the pockets of loneliness and fading memories, and into the longings and dreams of struggling yet noble, the tone is often poetic, although sometimes unsteady. It is no surprise to me that Emma Hooper is also a musician; I often could feel the beats and pauses as the novel progressed. All in all, a worthwhile read.

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## **Dorothy Flaxman says**

Etta's greatest unfulfilled wish, living in the rolling farmland of Saskatchewan, is to see the sea. At the age of 82 she gets up very early one morning takes a rifle, some chocolate, and her best boots and begins the 2000 mile walk to the sea.

I began to understand very early on that this book was not based on realism. An 82 year old woman, quite clearly, cannot walk 2000 miles alone and so there had to be some other premise on which to base the book. My take on the book is that it is based on the memories of Otto and Etta and their long life together along with their neighbour Russell, who has been in love with Etta for years.

The parts of the book which take place in the past worked, in my opinion, much better than those set in the present day. This is because these parts are based on fact and are merely reiterations of what happened.

The complications of the book arise when, for example, at one point Etta starts to describe her experiences in Europe during World War II to a reporter allegedly tagging along with her on her long trek. However, Etta has never been to war. Her memories are actually Otto's memories. Etta also shares Otto's dreams.

Whilst Etta is walking, Otto stays at home making paper Mache animals. Why paper Mache animals?

The ending of the book is not clear and is left for the reader to put their own interpretation on it, which is very annoying. I would have been happy to accept some of the make believe element of the book if a satisfactory explanation and conclusion had been reached. However, I was left very confused. The story appears to be a jumbled collection of ideas, which don't come together very well. There have been numerous books recently based on older individuals going walkabouts and doing crazy things and this combined with a WWII theme, did not quite work.

The plus points are that the book is moving in parts and the characters are likeable if a bit strange.

In conclusion, if you like quirky, hard to believe books then this is definitely one for you. If, like me, you like a good story with a conclusive ending then would advise you pass on this one.

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## **Nancy says**

I have read at least 50 books this year. It is a rare occasion at the book's end to find tears swelling in my eyes. Rarely do characters step out from behind the veil and take you traveling with them for some hundred pages so that at the journey's end you mourn the loss of what was shared.

Emma Hooper's Etta and Otto and Russell and James is that kind of book.

When I first saw the book on NetGalley and read it was about an 83 year old woman on a trek across Canada accompanied by a coyote I was not sure I wanted to read about old people.

For one thing as a pastor's wife I have spent my life, starting in my twenties, mostly around old people. And for another thing I am getting old myself. Later I looked at it again. I read the reviews:

"Hooper's spare, evocative prose dips in and out of reality and travels between past and present creating what Etta tells Otto is just a long loop. This is a quietly powerful story whose dreamlike quality lingers long after the last page is turned."— Library Journal (starred review)

"Etta and Otto and Russell and James is incredibly moving, beautifully written and luminous with wisdom. It is a book that restores one's faith in life even as it deepens its mystery. Wonderful!"— Chris Cleave, #1 New York Times Bestselling author of Little Bee

"Hooper's debut is a novel of memory and longing and desires too long denied...To a Cormac McCarthy--

like narrative--sans quotation marks, featuring crisp, concise conversations--Hooper adds magical realism.... The book ends with sheer poetry...A masterful near homage to Pilgrim's Progress: souls redeemed through struggle. " – Kirkus Reviews (starred review)  
This time I requested to read it.

I read it in 24 hours. I did not want to stop reading for meals. Or to go to a family Christmas gathering. Of course, I did stop, but some part of me was always tugging at the leash, eager to resume.

Plot? Here is what you need to know: everything is revealed in its time through the action of the story and the memories of the characters. It is about growing up in Saskatchewan during the dry and destitute years; about young people who dream of another life. It is about old people who fulfill long held desires. There is love and heartbreak, war and death. And, the way it is in old age, we do not always know the present from the past, or the imagined from the real. Scenes are impressionistic, insight is oblique, point of view shifts between persons and time.

Brilliant writing shoots forth from the page in stunning recognition: this is true. Hooper is a musician and the rhythm and lyricism of her language is pitch perfect. I can't wait to see what Emma Hooper pens in the future. If this her first novel is such high literature, of what will she be capable over a career?

Read this book.

I thank NetGalley and Simon and Schuster for the e-book in exchange for a fair and unbiased review.

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### **Brooke says**

Wow. I don't even know really what to say about this book.

After reading this I found out that Emma Hooper is also a musician. The style of writing that is in this book is very much like a song. With verses and choruses; going from past to present in short amount of words. Very poetic!

The story is gently told in such a beautiful and almost child-like way. I loved it! The ending was abrupt, but very meaningful and left the reader to interpret the story as a whole.

To me this story was about memories and the people who define our lives.

Beautiful debut! Read it!

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### **Paul says**

3.5 stars

An unusual and charming story which does not quite make its mind up what it wants to be. It is set in rural Canada in Saskatchewan. Etta and Otto are in their early 80s and have been married for over fifty years. Russell, their neighbour has known them both since childhood and has loved Etta since then as well. Etta appears to be in the early stages of dementia. Etta has never seen the sea and decides one day to walk to the

sea alone without telling anyone. She could walk about eight hundred miles west or over two thousand miles east. She chooses to walk east and leaves her husband a note:

"I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry, I've left you the truck. I can walk. I will try to remember to come back."

She also leaves recipe cards with instructions so Otto won't go hungry. James is a coyote who joins Etta as she walks towards the sea.

The story moves backwards and forwards in time, so there is a good deal about Otto and Russell's childhood, with Otto's fifteen siblings; the local school also plays a central role. Etta joins the story as the schoolteacher as Russell and Otto reach sixteen. We follow the characters through the Depression and to the Second World War, when Otto goes to fight. There are lots of letters as the timeline goes backwards and forwards. As Etta walks towards the sea, her memory and sense of herself becomes more fragile. Otto (he adopts a guinea pig and starts making papier mache animals) and Russell (he goes in search of migrating caribou) also have adventures of their own whilst Etta is on her journey.

So what is this? It could be described as a fairy story or a fable (albeit a rather long one). James, the coyote, talks to Etta and sings songs. Sometimes difficult situations are minimised. There is a description of a radio broadcast from Europe in the war describing the sufferings of prisoners in a room where the children become light as air and float out of the high windows:

"No one knew, said the radio, where they'd gone, or where or if they'd landed, though it was speculated to perhaps be Switzerland or perhaps Central Africa."

Of course we all know that the children have died. The novel seems to move between reality and fable in rather unpredictable ways. There is a good deal of poignancy and deliberations on the nature of friendship; there is also some decision making which leans more toward fairy tale than reality. Some of these twists and turns hinder character development and James at times feels like a plot device to keep Etta going on what would be an impossible task.

There are some touching moments and the description of Etta's dementia is good, but there is a confusion about what the novels intends to be (for me anyway).

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## Allie says

I happened upon an advanced reader's copy of this book, and I am going to really do my darnedest to convince anyone who is reading this review to ***give this book a shot because it is now one of my favorites ever.*** I even made a (rough) map of her journey and included excerpts to ignite your interest in this unique and special tale.

*Otto,*

*I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry, I've left you the truck. I can walk. I will try to remember to come back.*

*Yours (always),*

*Etta.*

Etta will be 83 in August. She has never seen the ocean and she is going to change that before it's too late. Etta is going to walk there. All 3,232 kilometers it will take her to get to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Alone.

She lives on a farm in Saskatchewan with her husband, Otto. Their next door neighbor, Russell, has known Otto since they were both six years old and he is an integral part of both Otto and Etta's lives. Russell waits outside his own farmhouse every morning before sunrise and every evening before sunset in the hopes of spotting some deer. Etta takes Russell cinnamon buns, Etta reminds Otto to wear his hat in the sun, Otto and Russell help each other on their farms. They are all getting old.

And they all have beautiful stories.

*Etta,*

*I am drawing a dotted line across our globe, starting from home, here, out along what I imagine is your path. I only put one or two dashes a day, small ones on our big globe, but it's nice to do, still, still, there is progress and I can watch it. Also, it can be like a Hansel and Gretel trail, leading you back here, should you forget the way. Even though I know you can't see it, or me, right now.*

*You must be in Manitoba by now.*

*I have planted the spring seeds. The spinach and carrots and radishes.*

*I am sending this to William, Harriet (4)'s son, who lives in Brandon. The accountant, you remember. In case you stop there, to sleep maybe, as you pass by, if you pass by, though I know you probably won't, and probably, William will be confused by the name on the envelope, "Etta Vogel, c/o William Porter," and will post it back to me, but that's okay. I'll give it to you when you get back; put it in a pile next to the pile I'm making of the letters you're sending here. They're on the kitchen table, because I hardly need all of it to eat at.*

*I haven't been out to see Russell, in his field, since last week, when he suggested that maybe I shouldn't come back for a little while because I've got a cough, and it could scare away the deer. So I stay away. But sometimes he comes by after he's done looking, and we have coffee, or sometimes he leaves notes on our door as he passes by. He is well. I haven't told him where you've gone. I tell him you're out, that's all.*

*Here,*

*Otto.*

*P.S. I know you have gone to see the water, and you should see it, Etta, you should, but, in case there are other reasons you've left, in case there are things you have discovered or undiscovered that you didn't want to tell me in person, in that case, you can always tell me here. Tell me here and we can never mention it outside of paper and ink (or pencil).*

Hooper made the stylistic decision to never use quotation marks. While this took some occasional rereading, it was easy to adjust to and in the end I liked the choice a lot:

*Are you here for another interview?*

*No, said Bryony.*

*Are you from here?*

*This bridge?*

*Well, maybe. This area.*

*No, I can hardly speak French at all. I'm here because, well, I've been following the story. And the crowds.*

*I've been in the crowds, each time, just in the back.*

*You never said hello, said Etta.*

*I'm sorry, said Bryony. I was gathering courage.*

*Did you want to give me something to carry with me? asked Etta.*

*Yes, said the reporter, that's it, exactly. I do. She paused. The pressed-wool shoulder lifted up and down in a sigh. Etta, she said, I'm so sick of everybody else's stories.*



*Have you brought me stories?*  
*No, myself.*

Emma Hooper is an author to watch. One of the best debut novels I have ever read, with a sweet and simple style that reads and feels like music. For a reason! In an interview with the Bookseller she explains: "I've got an obsessive nature when it comes to the rhythm of the words and I'll have sentences that are perfectly grammatically correct, but it has to have just the right amount of syllables," and "It's like when you play a symphony or a concerto, or even an album, it's one long piece, but the white space between the songs or between the movements is very important. You need a minute to digest and then move on."

This book is filled with such longing--such intense want and need--but as a reader you're not always entirely sure what for. Even when the desire is clear you just ache along with the characters, not knowing what to do. I truly felt by the end of it that I was a part of these characters' lives. They were part of mine. They will not be soon forgotten.

It is not told in chronological order, with lots of old memories and emotions resurfacing and demanding to be both heard and felt. I never found the jumping back and forth to be confusing, only enjoyable. Hooper also chooses to let her readers decide some things for themselves. A lot of affecting parts to the story are left open to interpretation and I know not everyone is a fan of that. I, myself, don't even like that a lot of time. However, *Etta and Otto and Russell and James* are each so individual and unique that it really just felt to me like listening to their stories as a friend. Many times in my life I have been faced with the task of listening to someone and trying to empathize, when I realize I will never fully understand the situation from their eyes. Some things are left up to me to try to grasp on my own.

And maybe, just maybe, I did as Emma Hooper wanted. "Trust the conclusion that they draw."

This book felt like music to me: in particular, this song.

It truly is a love letter to Canada. A beautiful country with beautiful people.

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### **Terri Jacobson says**

This book was a chore for me to finish. The premise is that 83 year old Etta Vogel, who lives on a farm with her husband, Otto, leaves home on a journey to walk from Saskatchewan to Halifax, Canada. The reasons she does this are never quite made clear. The story alternates from the present time to the past, when Etta and Otto first met each other. As Etta walks, she befriends a coyote who she names James. Russell is a childhood friend of Otto and Etta, and he has the farm next door to theirs. I found the whole premise unbelievable. (When I started the book, I thought it might be like *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, a book I liked very much. It wasn't.) The writing is nothing special, I didn't come to care about the characters, and I hated the ending. One of the worst books I've read in a while.

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### **Amy says**

Sometimes I find that the best writers break all the rules. It's not because they don't know the rules but that they are good enough to transcend the rules. Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner come to mind. If an

author's writing style is polished enough that a reader doesn't miss the missing quotation marks and commas, then the author can be forgiven for not using them. Emma Hooper is such a writer. The first thing that drew me to the novel was the title with all its palindromic names and names with double letters (including the author's) as well as the lack of commas. I liked the quirk it promised me.

The book starts with a letter:

*Otto,*

*I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry, I've left you the truck. I can walk. I will try to remember to come back.*

*Yours (always),  
Etta.*

The letter is from 83-year-old Etta, and it's only one of many in a lifetime of letters. The first letters Etta and Otto exchange are during the war not long after their first meeting. Thus, it only seems fitting that they're writing again at the end of their lives with her going to see the ocean that he saw all those many years ago, 3200 kilometers away from where they live in Saskatchewan.

Etta leaves the note behind along with a collection of recipe cards so that Otto can fend for himself. He finds solace in the rhythm of baking: *"Kneading, Otto thought as he moved his hands up and down in the dough, was the best part. It was the connection point, between you and the food. ... Once you got started, it was automatic and comforting. On, and on."* Similarly, Etta finds comfort in placing one foot behind another as she walks across Canada to the sea, connecting with her surroundings as if she belongs there.

While Etta tries to avoid populated areas, she still acquires a fan club of people who have spotted her along the way. They often give her small gifts like a bobby pin for her hair or small amounts of food. However, she also acquires a coyote walking companion named James to whom she talks. Etta doesn't seem the least bit surprised that James talks back to her. No, this isn't a foray into fantasy or magical realism; it's a glimpse into the mind of someone experiencing dementia. She seems to be somewhat lost in time as well as unable to differentiate fact from fiction. But yet Otto, their friend Russell, and most of Canada leaves Etta to her walking.

This is a beautiful story with threads that weave together past and present as one, not unlike the way Etta experiences time. It's a story of love, trust, and aging gracefully. Sometimes one simply exists and acts because one must, and to respect that person's need to act despite their state of mind is a gift. This book is a work of art. Be sure to put it on your must-read list for 2015.

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## **Diane S ? says**

A difficult book for me to review, so I am just going to tell you why I loved this story. The characters have such a touching vulnerability, they have known each other for such a long time, have a shared past that is memorable. A book about a journey, a quest if you will, about memories, longing and unfulfilled desires. Much is told in letters and flashbacks and a wonderful usage of magical realism. Those who go and those who stay waiting. An ending that is left to the reader's interpretation, but is poignant all the same. An amazing book, especially since this is the author's first. Quiet, melancholy and stunning, I can't believe that

anyone reading this book will not find it touching.

ARC from Netgalley.

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### **Maureen says**

I really hate to come across as negative, but primarily because of all the rave reviews for this book, I was really excited to get my hands on it. Did I set my expectations too high? Possibly. All I can say is I was so disappointed. The story of Etta setting off walking at the age of eighty two, to see the sea ( because she's never seen it ) WAS sweet and even moving at times, but it just didn't grab me in the same way that it did other reviewers.

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### **Connie says**

Etta left a letter for her husband Otto: "I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry, I've left you the truck. I can walk. I will try to remember to come back."

This charming story about three octogenarians had me turning the pages, hoping that Etta would fulfill her wish as she walked 3,200 km to the ocean. The book looks back at them growing up on the dry dusty farms of Saskatchewan, Russell's childhood injury, Etta teaching in a one-room schoolhouse, and Otto's terrible wartime experiences. Otto, Etta, and Russell were very devoted to each other. When Etta left on her walk it prompted both Otto and Russell to also experience something new and different in their lives. The flashbacks seem very realistic, but their present experiences seem more symbolic as they act on their unrealized dreams.

James is a magical surprise conjured up by Etta's foggy mind, and he helps her reach her destination. With a bit of magical realism at the conclusion, identities shift and merge as they float between the present and the past, and between reality and a dream. Delightful!

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### **Angela M says**

Is it unrealistic that an eighty two year old woman who is losing her memory will set out on a walk to the ocean that is 3232 kilometers away ( just over 2008 miles for those of you who need the conversion like I did), and that her husband of over 60 years would let her go while he stays home writing her letters he doesn't send and making paper mache figures ? It's hard to imagine that this would happen , but a lot of unlikely things happen in fiction and in life and this story isn't really just about this unlikely journey. Oh and yes adding to this unrealistic scenario there is a talking , singing coyote named James , Etta's trusty travel companion and part of her reality at this time .

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It's about the journey of Etta's , Otto's lives in Gopherlands,, Saskatchewan . It's also about their friend , Russell's journey . He has been in Otto's life since they were six , and Otto has always watched out for Russell since the accident that happened when they were children . Russell too loves Etta and is mad as hell that Otto wouldn't go to find her, so he does and discovers something about himself on his own journey.

Through the simplicity of the writing, alternating between the past present, we come to know about Etta and Otto and Russell and about their pretty much quiet lives that reflect hardship, war, family and love.

The story was reminiscent of *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*. This time an elderly woman, losing her memory and walking to the ocean instead of an elderly man walking to his dying friend. I felt that even though the idea was not quite original, I was drawn to this story because there is so much here. Etta too has followers like Harold Frye. Photographers, and journalists and everyday people who see Etta along the way give her any number of tokens to take along with her. The most poignant of gifts to take along is when Bryony gives herself as a travel partner for a little while and then discovers what her own journey is really all about.

Some readers will find it easy to dismiss this as odd and unrealistic .To them, I would say to look beyond what's not believable, and I hope you find what I did: a touching story about quiet lives lived on the farms in Gopherlands, Saskatchewan and the things that shaped these people and the very real things that life brings – chances taken or not, aging and the possibility that one can lose themselves like Etta did as she loses her memory. Four stars for me.

Thanks to Simon & Schuster and NetGalley.

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### **Alena says**

I really enjoyed the structure of this novel, with the shifting perspectives narrated in very short chapters and letters. The storytelling flowed quickly and the "unknowns" made perfect sense given the different storytellers. I've ready many comparisons to *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, which are fair. This is also a pilgrimage novel but it veers from Harold Fry in so many ways, not the least of which is a talking coyote.

I like this book for its quirkiness, for its balance of dark and light, for its fast pace and for its heartbreaking honesty, especially in the end.

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