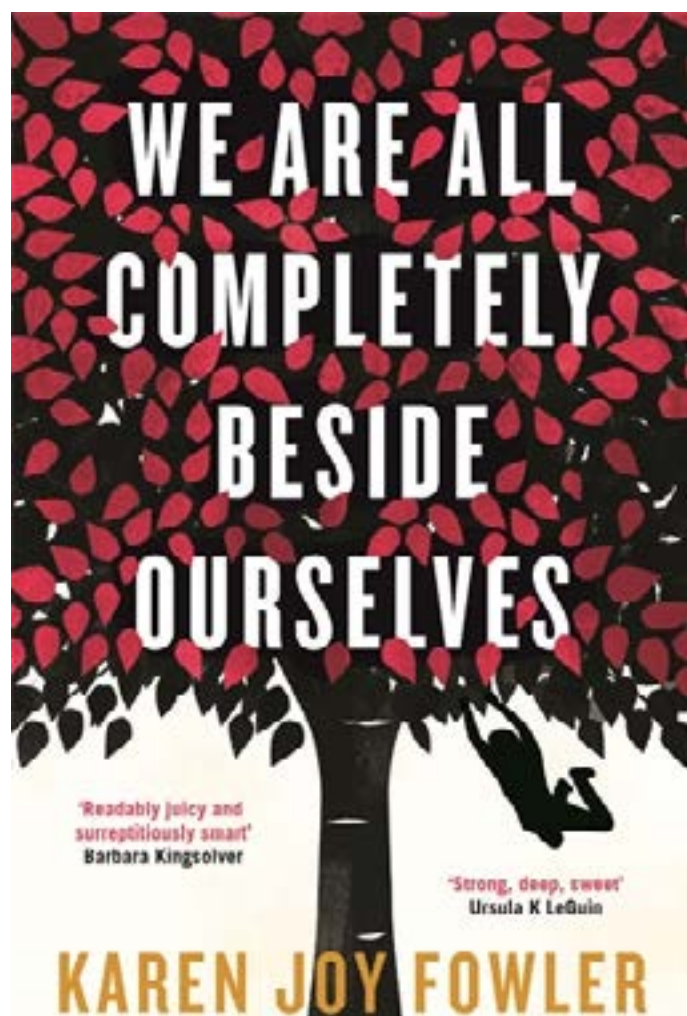


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

You can't choose your family, but they can make choices for you. Big, life-defining choices.

Rosemary's young, just at college, and she's decided not to tell anyone a thing about her family. So we're not going to tell you too much either: you'll have to find out for yourselves what it is that makes her unhappy family unlike any other. Rosemary is now an only child, but she used to have a sister the same age as her, and an older brother. Both are now gone - vanished from her life.

There's something unique about Rosemary's sister, Fern. So now she's telling her story; a looping narrative that begins towards the end, and then goes back to the beginning. Twice.

Rosemary was not yet six when Fern was removed. Over the years, she's managed to block a lot of memories. She's smart, vulnerable, innocent, and culpable. With some guile, she guides us through the darkness, penetrating secrets and unearthing memories, leading us deeper into the mystery she has dangled before us from the start. Stripping off the protective masks that have hidden truths too painful to acknowledge, in the end, "Rosemary" truly is for remembrance.

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is funny, clever, intimate, honest, analytical and swirling with ideas that will come back to bite you. The story of an American family, middle class in middle America, ordinary in every way ... but one. But that exception is the beating heart of this extraordinary novel.

About the author

Karen Joy Fowler (born February 7, 1950) is an American author of science fiction, fantasy, and literary fiction. Her work often centers on the nineteenth century, the lives of women, and alienation. She has written six novels and three short story collections and is best known as the author of the best-selling novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* which spent thirteen weeks on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, was a *New York Times* Notable Book and was made into a movie of the same name.

Reviews & Quotes

"Elegantly and humorously orchestrated ... Knitting together Rosemary's at times poignant, at times hilarious scraps of uncovered memories, Fowler creates a fantastical tale of raw, animalistic love."—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

"A novel so readably juicy and surreptitiously smart, it deserves all the attention it can get ... [Its] fresh diction and madcap plot bend the tone toward comedy, but it never mislays its solemn raison d'être. Monkeyshines aside, this is a story of Everyfamily in which loss engraves relationships, truth is a soulful stalker and coming-of-age means facing down the mirror, recognizing the shape-shifting notion of self."—Barbara Kingsolver, *The New York Times Book Review*

"A boldly exploratory evocation of a cross-species relationship ... Fowler has thoroughly researched her fascinating subject."—Joyce Carol Oates, *The New York Review of Books*

"Fowler knows how to make her story funny and sad and disturbing and revelatory by erecting a space in which her reader is allowed to feel all of that for herself." — *Salon*

"[The novel] lies somewhere between psychological thriller, scientific theory and coming-of-age story, a seemingly untenable combination. But Fowler, through wit and mastery of her craft, handles the complexity effortlessly."
— *USA Today*

"...by all accounts a deeply affecting read" — *ELLE*, The *ELLE* Readers' Prize, July 2013

"Rosemary's voice—vulnerable, angry, shockingly honest—is so compelling and the cast of characters, including Fern, irresistible. A fantastic novel: technically and intellectually complex, while emotionally gripping."
— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Piquant humor, refulgent language, a canny plot rooted in real-life experiences, an irresistible narrator, thrashing insights, and tender emotions—Fowler has outdone herself in this deeply inquisitive, cage-rattling novel."
— *Booklist* (starred review)

"A strong, unsettling novel ... Fowler explores the depths of human emotions and delivers a tragic love story that captures our hearts." — *Library Journal* (starred review)

"Rosemary's experience [is] a fascinating basis for insight into memory, the mind, and human development ... Fowler's great accomplishment is not just that she takes the standard story of a family and makes it larger, but that the new space she's created demands exploration." — *Publishers Weekly*

"*We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is a dark cautionary tale hanging out, incognito-style, in what at first seems a traditional family narrative. It is anything but. This novel is deliciously jaunty in tone and disturbing in material. Karen Joy Fowler tells the story of how one animal—the animal of man—can simultaneously destroy and expand our notion of what is possible." — Alice Sebold, *New York Times*-bestselling author of *The Lovely Bones*

For discussion

- 📖 'Start in the middle,' Rosemary's father says at the beginning of the book. How does the order that Rosemary tells her story affect how we get to know her?
- 📖 It's not until page 77 that we discover Rosemary's sister Fern is a chimpanzee. Rosemary's keen to control the way the reader is introduced to certain ideas, in this case so that she can establish Fern as her sister and not an animal. Did that work for you? And how do these deliberate omissions relate to those things Rosemary can't bring herself to remember, such as the reason for Fern being sent away?
- 📖 There are hints to Fern's true nature in the book before you're told: did you sense there was something different about her?

- ☞ 'An oft-told story is like a photograph in an album; eventually, it replaces the moment it was meant to capture.' How we experience the past is central to the book. Rosemary's memories of her childhood are sometimes sharp, and sometimes cloudy. Many of her memories rely on her senses. And often we are aware that how she remembers experiencing something isn't necessarily the way it actually happened. How true to your own experience does the presentation of memory seem?
- ☞ Rosemary combines being fiercely intellectually engaged and engaging with being – she says – a lazy scholar. How does Rosemary's intellect relate to the structured academic environment she was raised in?
- ☞ 'My father made a crude joke ... If the joke were witty, I'd include it, but it wasn't. You'd think less of him and thinking less of him is my job, not yours.' How do these moments where Rosemary is talking straight to the reader affect our relationship to her and to her family?
- ☞ Rosemary says more than once that unfairness bothers children and chimps greatly. Do you agree?
- ☞ Many people will have known that Fern is a chimpanzee before beginning the book. Some people say this makes it more compelling, others wish they hadn't known. There is a study that suggests that knowing the end – or the middle – of a plot doesn't actually decrease our enjoyment of it. What do you think, does knowing a plot point spoil the story or enhance it?
- ☞ Does the ending mean Rosemary has atoned for her earlier sins? Did she need to?
- ☞ Does 'This, then, is the me I know – the human half of the fabulous, the fascinating, the phantasmagorical Cooke sisters.' To what extent does Rosemary still define herself against, and alongside, Fern? And what exactly is it that makes them different? Using tools and language have both been suggested as the line between being a human and an animal, but we now know that some animals use tools and language too. So what are the qualities that distinguish Fern and Rosemary?
- ☞ 'It's hard to overstate how lonely I was. Let me just repeat that I'd once gone, in a matter of days, from a childhood where I was never alone to this prolonged, silent only-ness.' When Rosemary meets Harlow, she finds her fascinating, despite knowing intuitively that she's untrustworthy. What is it about Harlow that Rosemary finds so irresistible?
- ☞ 'It seemed to Lowell that psychological studies of nonhuman animals were mostly cumbersome, convoluted, and downright peculiar. They taught us little about the animals but lots about the researchers who designed and ran them ... "We need a sort of reverse mirror text. Some way to identify those species smart enough to see themselves when they look at someone else."' How does this idea relate to the characters in the book?
- ☞ 'I've tried so hard to rescue her. Years and years of trying and what does Fern have to show for it? What a miserable excuse for a brother I turned out to be.' How do feelings of responsibility colour the Cooke family's interactions with each other?

- ☞ “The world runs,” Lowell said, “on the fuel of this endless, fathomless misery. People know it, but they don’t mind what they don’t see. Make them look and they mind, but you’re the one they hate, because you’re the one that made them look.” Has reading this book changed the way you feel about animals and humans? In what context?
- ☞ The non-human rights movement, which seeks legal rights for great apes, cetaceans, and elephants, is rapidly expanding. In India, dolphins have been awarded non-human personhood status, and keeping them for entertainment is banned. Others argue they should be granted rights as ‘living property’, thus protecting their best interests but not bestowing independent rights. What legal status do you believe animals should have? Should it vary according to the relative intelligence of a species? Should animals that are demonstrably self-aware, such as chimps, be granted the right to life and freedom from captivity?
- ☞ ‘It’s hard enough here to forgive myself for the things I did and felt when I was five, hopeless for the way I behaved at fifteen. Lowell heard that Fern was in a cage in South Dakota and he took off that very night. I heard the same thing and my response was to pretend I hadn’t heard it.’ In the book, Lowell takes action and Rosemary finds herself paralysed. How does this relate to the themes of scientific experiment vs lived experience?
- ☞ ‘The Davis primate centre is today credited with significant advances in our understanding and treatment of SIV, Alzheimer’s, autism, and Parkinson’s. Nobody’s arguing these issues are easy.’ If you draw a line between useful and not useful animal experiment, where do you place it?’
- ☞ ‘Next time, I’ll put things right between my father and me. Next time, I’ll give Mom the fair share of blame for Fern ... Next time, I’ll take the share that’s mine, no more, no less.’ How does Rosemary’s wish to relive and correct the past reflect her acceptance of what really happened?
- ☞ Rosemary’s mother says to her, ‘I wanted you to have an extraordinary life.’ To what extent is that a legitimate desire of a parent for a child? To what extent is it fair to a child to enact it? Is the choice that Rosemary’s parents made for her, to give her a chimp sister, acceptable?
- ☞ When Lowell is arrested, Rosemary says, ‘I’ve read that since his arrest he hasn’t said a single word. Everyone else is mystified by this silence, but his reasons couldn’t be more obvious to me. He was halfway there when I last saw him sixteen years ago. Lowell has decided to be tried as an animal. The nonhuman kind.’ Does this best serve Lowell’s purpose and that of the animals he has always sought to defend?
- ☞ ‘Lowell’s life has been the direct result of his very best qualities, of our very best qualities – empathy, compassion, loyalty, and love.’ Bearing in mind that Lowell’s organisation promises not to harm humans or animals, though he is said to have set fire to property amongst other things, is this a fair description of his activity?

Suggested further reading

Nim Chimpsky, The Chimp Who Would Be Human by Elizabeth Hess

Project Nim - A book and film about Nim Chimpsky, a chimp at the centre of a research project that was mounted to determine whether a primate raised in close contact with humans could develop a limited 'language' based on American Sign Language.

<http://www.project-nim.com/>

The Great Ape Project - The Great Ape Project is an idea, a book, and an organization hoping to include the nonhuman great apes within the community of equals by granting them the basic moral and legal protection that only human beings currently enjoy.

<http://www.greatapetrust.org/>

Iowa Primate Learning - Bonobo Hope at the Iowa Primate Learning Sanctuary is a non-invasive, interdisciplinary and interspecies scientific research facility in Iowa, with special focus directed to areas of language, the creation and implementation of tools, musical and artistic creativity, and intelligence, all of which help answer the foundational question, 'What makes us human?'

<http://www.iowaprimatlearning.org/>

Primate Cognition Lab, Columbia, Herbert Terrace - The Primate Cognition Laboratory researches the cognitive abilities of non-human primates: their ability to learn lists of pictures and numerical stimuli and to evaluate their own performance on various tasks. Most remarkable is that they can engage in these cognitive activities without the help of language.

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/psychology/primatecognitionlab/>

Washoe Experiment - Washoe (1965 –2007) was a female common chimpanzee who was the first non-human to learn to communicate using American Sign Language, as part of a research experiment on animal language acquisition by Allen and Beatrix Gardner. See also *Friends of Washoe*, a non-profit organization, dedicated to the welfare of chimpanzees and especially the chimpanzees at the Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washoe_%28chimpanzee%29, http://www.friendsofwashoe.org/learn/about_fow_chci.html, <http://www.cwu.edu/chci/>

The Mind of an Ape by David and Ann James Premack - A 1983 account of the authors' work teaching chimpanzees to use a symbolic language – addresses questions of language, thought, intention, and understanding in chimps.

Kanzi: An Ape of Genius - The 1993 documentary, 'Kanzi: An Ape of Genius' shows the research and life of Kanzi, a bonobo chimpanzee, and Dr. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh at the Georgia State University Language Research Center in Atlanta, GA.

<http://kanzi.bvu.edu/>

Koko, A Talking Gorilla - *Koko: A Talking Gorilla* is a 1978 documentary directed by Barbet Schroeder that focuses on Dr. Francine 'Penny' Patterson and her work with Koko, the gorilla Patterson claims to have taught to communicate with humans using symbols taken from American Sign Language.
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076097/>

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology - The Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology unites scientists with various backgrounds (natural sciences and humanities) whose aim is to investigate the history of humankind from an interdisciplinary perspective with the help of comparative analyses of genes, cultures, cognitive abilities, languages and social systems of past and present human populations as well as those of primates closely related to human beings.
<http://www.eva.mpg.de/>