

That noticing

Emily Perkins' latest novel is a 'sensitive, complex and often surprising' portrait of an ordinary life. **Angela Meyer** spoke to the author.



I love the ways you explore the concept of time in *The Forrests*: how quickly it passes, the gaps that occur, its elasticity (particularly in old age), and the way the past encroaches upon the present. Was this exploration one of your main drives for writing the novel?

Yes, very much so. I was writing it with a strong sense of the ways we experience time—how sometimes its flow seems so fast and inescapable, and how a way of countering that is to try to really notice things. Also yes, the long tail of the past. Maybe for a lot of our early lives we have no sense of that, which is a great freedom, then suddenly you look behind you and there it is! Your life has happened one way and that is unchangeable. Of course this doesn't have to be a bad thing—and what can change is the way you feel or what you do about that.

Dorothy Forrest's story features many of the events of a life: falling in love, getting married, having children, grieving for someone, getting older. But you tell an ordinary, realist story in sensitive, complex and often surprising ways. What makes you want to deal with the events of a life in this way?

It probably has something to do with that noticing thing—I am a fan of what is sometimes called democratic artwork that presents small- and large-scale events with equal value. We all experience the big and the small but in the moment of living it we often don't feel a qualitative difference—tiny things can be really surprising and weird and fun and intense. I was keen to try to get at that, the textural complexity in simple things—and the multitude of surprises in life—also hopefully to make that a kind of pleasure for the reader.

Out of the Forrests, why was it Dorothy who you followed through to the end? In the drafting process did you also try following any of the other Forrests, or Daniel, the family friend, for longer?

It was always Dot and Daniel's story, really. There were some extra episodes with both of them but they didn't quite make it!

You seem to avoid clichés at all costs; your writing is incredibly spontaneous and refreshing, but I'm sure it takes a lot of work to make it seem that way. Could you tell us a bit about your process?

Again it comes back to noticing, which is a pretty bland word but a bit crisper than the more detached 'observing'—and to the value of sensation—the texture of the world, the senses—the way we live in our bodies. It was important to have the writing precise enough to reflect that, and clichés (even the true ones) are the enemy of precision. So I tried to feel the hum of things as they were being written. Without wanting to get too technical I also tried to get away from some of the rhythms we enjoy in prose, because sometimes those rhythms can lull us out of noticing the things they describe.

Do you think one way we deal with getting older, and with surviving the changes that time—and its quick passing—brings, is to confront it through art? Who are some of the writers or creative artists that you turn to?

Ha, yes, I'm probably more interested in art that deals with time than I was when I was younger ... I love any art that doesn't go for cheap consolations but still finds value in the experience and passing of time. I love it in books when time

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is unhooked from the clock—it's one of the great things fiction can do. I love movies that might be seen as 'slow' like say, recently, *Meek's Cutoff*—and abstract painting where you can enter it in different places, though I also really like some figurative paintings like Peter Doig's work or Paula Rego's, where there's this lush evocative sensory effect and you can invent a narrative if you want.

The Forrests is published by Bloomsbury in May. See review, page 23.

What was the last book you read and loved?

This year I loved Edmund De Waal's *The Hare With Amber Eyes* (Vintage) and a new book by Fiona Farrell, *The Broken Book* (Auckland University Press), which is about writing and thinking and was interrupted and informed by the Christchurch earthquake. In fiction I've really enjoyed Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* (Fourth Estate)—sheer pleasure—and *Bird North and Other Stories* (Victoria University Press), the first book from a new short story writer from NZ, Breton Dukes.



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