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Reviews



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THE FORRESTS

by *Emily Perkins*

Reviewed by *Judy Lim*

Frank and Lee move their family of four children from New York to Auckland. Frank is an unrecognized artist from a background of wealth and entitlement, but in New Zealand the family is barely surviving. Lee takes a job as a teacher and Frank continues to paint. The four children—Michael, Evelyn, Dorothy (Dot) and Ruth love their wild life in their new country and in response to their parent's strained relationship form a strong bond.

Daniel, a school friend, starts to spend more and more time with the children. His background is never quite explained, but the Forrests accept him as one of their own and gradually he becomes a part of their family. Daniel entwines himself into their lives, especially that of Dot and Evelyn, and his presence or absence during certain times in their lives impacts strongly on the family.

Perkins has developed the story through a series of vignettes that reveal aspects in the lives of the Forrests, but Dot is the one whose life we become most familiar with. Each chapter brings a revelation that sweeps us along through Dot's childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age and final years. Her life is an ordinary one, yet extraordinary things happen. She suffers from loss, illness and accidents, and she exults in love, romance and those small moments in a life that will always be cherished.

The other members of her family slip away from her. She is left with her husband, who has too many of her own father's characteristics to be the perfect partner she so desires; her own four children for whom she has unfailing love during their younger years and who simply confuse her as they grow older; and her constant desire for Daniel and the relationship which was never resolved. The brief moments when she is brought back together with her siblings and parents mystify and perplex Dot and are always complicated.

Perkins delivers this story in extreme focus. It reads like a slideshow where the characters dominate the screen, leaving only small suggestions of the background. At times she delivers the minutiae of an everyday life, yet this detail is never dull. It is not possible to skip over it and search out the next more exciting chapter; every word deserves to be read.

Perkins has written a book that is deeply satisfying on many levels. Its specificity allows the reader to relate to Dot's life, her needs and desires even while appreciating that there is a bigger world out there that is being ignored. Perkin's language is sensitive, seductive and sublime. She writes about Dot's ordinary life with compassion and humour that confirms that even an everyday life is a life worth living.

