



# We are all completely beside ourselves

By Karen Joy Fowler

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Genre & subject

Families fiction

Life changing events

## Synopsis

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... It's funny, clever, intimate, honest, analytical and swirling with ideas that will come back to bite you. We hope you enjoy it, and if, when you're telling a friend about it, you do decide to spill the beans about Fern, don't feel bad. It's pretty hard to resist.

## Author biography

Fowler was born in Bloomington, Indiana, and spent the first eleven years of her life there. Her family then moved to Palo Alto, California. Fowler attended the University of California, Berkeley, and majored in political science. After having a child during the last year of her master's program, she spent seven years devoted to child-raising. Feeling restless, Fowler decided to take a dance class, and then a creative writing class at the University of California, Davis. Realising that she was never going to make it as a dancer, Fowler began to publish science fiction stories, making a name for herself with the short story *Recalling Cinderella* in *L Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future Volume 1* (1985) and *Artificial Things* (1986), a collection of short stories.

## Discussion starters

- Early on in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, the character Rosemary Cooke tells the reader that she will start her story "in the middle." Why is it important to her to skip the beginning?
- Rosemary recounts many memories of the chimpanzee Fern and their brief life together. How were she and Fern, in the language of the novel, "Same" and "NotSame"? What does their relationship suggest about the compatibility of humans and primates? How are humans different from other animals?

- How did being co-raised with a chimpanzee impact Rosemary's development? In what ways was she different from other, "normal" children? How does she still differ from them to this day?
- Consider Rosemary's father and mother. Are they good parents? Should they have handled Fern's leaving any differently? If so, how?
- Each member of the Cooke family was dramatically-indeed, traumatically-affected by the loss of Fern. Did they share a personal sense of guilt? Of regret? Of responsibility for what happened? If so, how did these emotions manifest themselves in each family member? How do their responses enrich our understanding of these people?
- What is your opinion of Rosemary's brother, Lowell Cooke? Are his extreme views and actions at all justified? Does he truly have Fern's well-being at heart?
- How does Harlow Fielding's whirlwind entrance into Rosemary Cooke's world alter Rosemary's trajectory through life?
- Think about the significance of memory and storytelling in the novel. How is Rosemary's memory-and, consequently, her narrative-affected by the emotional trauma she has experienced?
- Consider Harlow Fielding and Ezra Metzger's failed attempt to liberate monkeys from the primate center, both the motivations of these co-conspirators and the outcome itself. Was their mission in any way an admirable act? How were Harlow and Ezra's intentions different or similar to Lowell's?
- Do you think Rosemary comes to find peace with her family history by the end of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*?
- Is animal experimentation ever justified? If so, under what circumstances?

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