

# Perfect Reader

by Maggie Pouncey

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## About the Book

In this enchanting debut novel, Maggie Pouncey brings to life the unforgettable Flora Dempsey, the headstrong and quick-witted only child of Lewis Dempsey, a beloved former college president and famous literary critic in the league of Harold Bloom.

At the news of her father's death, Flora quits her big-city magazine job and returns to Darwin, the quaint New England town where she grew up, to retreat into the house he has left her, filled as it is with reminders of him. Even weightier is her appointment as her father's literary executor. It seems he was secretly writing poems at the end of his life --- love poems to a girlfriend Flora didn't know he had. Flora soon discovers that this woman has her own claims on Lewis's poetry and his memory, and in the righteousness of her loss and bafflement at her father's secrets --- his life so richly separate from her own in ways she never guessed --- Flora is highly suspicious of her. Meanwhile, Flora is besieged by well-wishers and literary bloggers alike as she tries to figure out how to navigate it all: the fate of the poems, the girlfriend who wants a place in her life, her memories of her parents' divorce, and her own uncertain future.

At once comic and profound, **Perfect Reader** is a heady, uplifting story of loneliness and of the spur to growth that grief can be. Brimming with energy and with the elbow-patchy wisdom of her still-vivid father, Flora's story will set her free to be the "perfect reader" not just of her father's life but of her own as well.

## Discussion Guide

1. The past obviously seeps into the novel through Flora's memories. How important are stories of our past in defining who we are in the present? Discuss the importance of family stories in this novel, particularly in connection with Flora and her childhood.
2. Discuss the father-daughter relationship that Flora and Lewis Dempsey shared. How has the relationship influenced

Flora? How does it continue to influence her after his death? In contrast, describe Flora's relationship with her mother.

**3.** How well do you think we can really know our parents? How well do you think Flora knew/knows her parents?

**4.** Why do you think Lewis Dempsey chose his daughter as his literary executor rather than a colleague, a student, or his girlfriend? Who would you choose as your literary executor if you were a writer? Why? If you could be the executor for a well-known writer, for whom would you want to serve this function and why? What does it mean to be someone's perfect reader??

**5.** What does this novel say about life in academia? Do you think Perfect Reader critiques or celebrates that life?

**6.** Why does Flora take a class with her father's rival? What does she hope to learn from being in class again and from him in particular?

**7.** Does Flora view inheriting her father's house and his manuscript as more of an honor or a burden? Does this change over the course of the novel?

**8.** How does Lewis Dempsey's wonderfully detailed house function as a character in Perfect Reader?

**9.** How does Flora's separation from her close childhood friend, who was almost like a sister, influence her as an adult? Is she still haunted by what happened between them?

**10.** Flora says Darwin has "no future, only past. Why had she returned? To bring it all back, or to bury it?" How would you answer her questions? How do the particularities of Darwin affect its inhabitants, both students and locals? How do they affect Flora, now that she has returned after being away for a number of years?

**11.** What are the crucial differences between Flora's life in Darwin and in the city? How does place influence her lifestyle, choices, and even temperament and personality? Where is "home" for Flora?

**12.** Though Flora is twenty-eight, do you think this is a coming-of-age story? Why?

**13.** Discuss the theme of betrayal and forgiveness in Perfect Reader. How does it play out between Flora and Paul? What about between Georgia and Flora? Who has betrayed whom in their friendship? Do Georgia's parents forgive Flora? Discuss the theme of forgiveness with relation to Flora and Cynthia. How do various acts of forgiveness add to Flora's maturing in the novel?

**14.** Discuss Flora's relationship with Esther, a friend from high school who traveled down a very different path, becoming a young mother and conservative Christian. Discuss Esther's influence on Flora, both when they were in high school and in the present time of the novel. What does she teach Flora over the course of Perfect Reader?

**15.** Describe the structure of the book. How does the structure work with the plot and the atmosphere of the novel? What do the flashbacks add? Why do you think the author decided to tell the story in the third person rather than the first?

16. How has Flora's relationship to her father changed by the end of the novel? How do you think that relationship will influence her life going forward?

## Author Bio

Maggie Pouncey was born in New York City and grew up there and in Amherst, Massachusetts, and New Haven, Connecticut. She received her BA and MFA from Columbia University and has taught writing at Columbia, the Bard Prison Initiative, and the New York City nonprofit Girls Write Now. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and son.

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