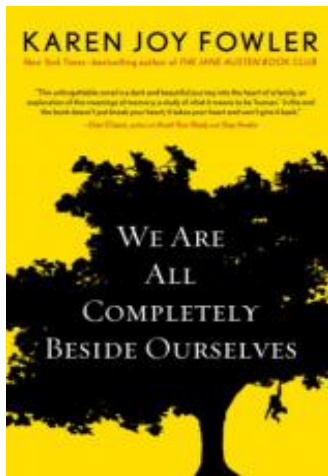


# We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

by Karen Joy Fowler

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## About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of *THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB* introduces a middle-class American family, ordinary in every way but one.

Meet the Cooke family: Mother and Dad, brother Lowell, sister Fern and Rosemary, who begins her story in the middle. She has her reasons. "I was raised with a chimpanzee," she explains. "I tell you Fern was a chimp and already you aren't thinking of her as my sister. But until Fern's expulsion she was my twin, my funhouse mirror, my whirlwind other half and I loved her as a sister." As a child, Rosemary never stopped talking. Then, something happened, and Rosemary wrapped herself in silence.

In *WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES*, Karen Joy Fowler weaves her most accomplished work to date --- a tale of loving but fallible people whose well-intentioned actions lead to heartbreaking consequences.

## Discussion Guide

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?

4. Consider Rosemary's father and mother. Are they good parents? Should they have handled Fern's leaving any differently? If so, how?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. How does Harlow Fielding's whirlwind entrance into Rosemary Cooke's world alter Rosemary's trajectory through life?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. Do you think Rosemary comes to find peace with her family history by the end of *WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES*?
11. Is animal experimentation ever justified? If so, under what circumstances?

## Author Bio

Karen Joy Fowler, a PEN/Faulkner and California Book Award winner, is the author of six novels (two of them *New York Times* bestsellers) and four short story collections. She has been a Dublin IMPAC nominee, and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014. She lives in Santa Cruz, California.

## Critical Praise

Fowler's interests here are in what sets humans apart from their fellow primates. Cognitive, language and memory skills all come into playful question. But the heart of the novel --- and it has a big, warm, loudly beating heart throughout --- is in its gradually pieced-together tale of family togetherness, disruption and reconciliation. *WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES* is Fowler at her best, mixing cerebral and emotional appeal together in an utterly captivating manner.

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# **We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves**

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**Publication Date:** May 30, 2013

**Genres:** Fiction

**Hardcover:** 320 pages

**Publisher:** A Marian Wood Book/Putnam

**ISBN-10:** 0399162097

**ISBN-13:** 9780399162091